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The Right Place and the Right People: Sherwood Anderson's Search for Salvation.

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THE RIGHT PLACE AND THE RIGHT PEOPLE
SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S SEARCH FOR SALVATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by
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ABSTRACT

Despite the abundance of literary criticism devoted to Sherwood Anderson, the pattern of his life and literary career has never been adequately investigated. Each of the authors of the four books about him fails to see that Anderson was engaged in more than a search for the meaning of his own life and the American life about him. A close reading of his major works reveals that the basic pattern of Anderson's life and literary career was more definitive-- it assumes the form of a genuine search for the spiritual salvation both of his own soul and the American soul. The search represents Anderson's abortive attempt to solve the problem of spiritual desolation in twentieth-century America.

After a chapter outlining Anderson's life, this study begins by considering the inspirational sources, literary and personal, of his quest for salvation. His works which clearly illustrate the thesis are discussed in four chapters, corresponding to the four stages of Anderson's quest for salvation. It is found that Anderson's first two books, Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men, assert the centrality to salvation of two life-principles: child-rearing and brotherhood. His next three, Mid-American Chants, Winesburg, Ohio and Poor White, investigate "the hope in the corn," the chances of a return to an elemental, agrarian kind of existence. Following the

authority of Sigmund Freud and D. H. Lawrence, Anderson's next two novels, Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, seek in sex, "the white wonder of life," a medium of universal communion and self-realization. Contrasting the "impotence" of the white man with the primitive vitality of the Negro, these novels ask whether a life of elemental and spontaneous emotion will not restore man's former purity and nobility. Written in the belief that communion with the little lives of ordinary Americans was essential to the success of his search, subsequent works by Anderson, Hello Towns!, Perhaps Women, Puzzled America, and Beyond Desire, record his attempt to "sink back into life" by editing country newspapers and championing the cause of oppressed workers in the depression years.

Anderson's search for spiritual salvation failed because his constant need for redeeming personal renewal made it impossible for him to attain a state of spiritual repose implicit in the idea of salvation and because each of his paths to salvation returned to its commencement. More basically, he failed because of his underlying deterministic conviction that all human relations and aspirations are ultimately futile. His successive visions of community slipped away from him. Inadequately nourished on vague nostalgia and romantic idealism, the fruit of his search for salvation could only be the realization that "the right place and the right people" were not to be found because they never were.

But in spite of the limitations of his vision, Anderson made a valuable literary achievement. For while his work reveals his failure to reconcile the forces of abstraction and materialism, or the world-as-idea and the world-as-will, it endures as an impressive statement of the conflict between these two chief impulses in the American experience. In this sense, Anderson's achievement is a record of the struggle of American culture to come of age. By investigating the interior of the cultural conflict in America he defined a new approach to the American experience for American writers. Moreover, in portraying the American small town as the nexus of the forces of abstraction and materialism, he became one of its profoundest interpreters.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: THE CRITICISM OF ANDERSON

Although Winesburg, Ohio is the only one of his twenty-five books that is widely read today, there has never been a dearth of academic interest in the life and literary career of Sherwood Anderson. In 1927, the mid-point of his career, two book-length studies of him were published by Cleveland B. Chase and N. Bryllion Fagin. In 1951, ten years after his death, two more were published by Irving Howe and James Schevill. Walter B. Rideout has promised for 1960 a book that should be a definitive biography, based as it is on the recently collated Anderson collection at the Newberry Library. This library also houses eight unpublished theses and dissertations on Anderson, one being an extensive bibliography by Raymond D. Gozzi.

Since Anderson began writing there has been a constant flow of articles, essays, and monographs on him. This commentary ranges from the informal reminiscences of his "Chicago Renaissance" friends (Margaret Anderson, Harry Hansen, Eunice Tietjens, Harriett Monroe), through the sympathetic appreciation of his contemporaries (Waldo Frank, Van Wyck Brooks, Paul Rosenfeld, Edmund Wilson), to the mixed reactions of the generation of critics who followed

them (Lionel Trilling, Alfred Kazin, Frederick Hoffman, Maxwell Geismar).¹

II

By and large critics have never been enthusiastic about Anderson. Almost without exception, they have dismissed all but the smallest segment of his work, given some qualified praise to this, and then drawn sweeping conclusions concerning the nature of his art and the limitations of his talent. They have held Winesburg, Ohio, Poor White, Dark Laughter and some half dozen short stories--such as "The Triumph of the Egg," "I'm a Fool," "I Want to Know Why," "The Man Who Became a Woman," "Death in the Woods," and "Brother Death"--to be sufficiently representative of the best and worst in Anderson. While Winesburg, Ohio and the "best" stories demonstrate Anderson's early brilliance of technique, the critics say, Poor White and Dark Laughter demonstrate his failure to develop a style capable of sustaining an idea throughout a full-length novel. And invariably the critics have concluded that Anderson's appeal is to the emotional responses of adolescence rather than to the discernment of maturity.

¹Representative approaches and attitudes to Anderson are conveniently brought together in Story magazine for September-October, 1941, and The Newberry Library Bulletin for December, 1948, both of which were Anderson memorial issues.

Let us see more specifically what it is in Anderson's thought and art that his most important critics find unacceptable.

Cleveland B. Chase, whose Sherwood Anderson (1927) was one of the first full-length studies made of him, finds that "Anderson turned to writing as a refuge from life, and, having established that refuge, he retreated into it and barricaded himself there."² Only eleven years after Anderson's literary career had begun, Chase saw that Anderson was re-enacting that retreat, "in almost every book he has written. He writes to escape from life, and, as a rule life escapes from his writing."³ This pervasive escapism in Anderson is responsible for "that softness, that sentimentality, that inability or that unwillingness to see things that keeps him from being the great writer he so often shows the promise of becoming."⁴ His compulsion toward escape is rooted in the fact that "Anderson doesn't understand and at heart dislikes modern life."⁵ The dilemma of Anderson, as Chase sees it, is that "no matter that there was much in that life to dislike, it is the only life Anderson

²Cleveland B. Chase, Sherwood Anderson (New York: Robert M. McBride and Company, 1927), p. 14.

³Loc. cit.

⁴Ibid., p. 13.

⁵Ibid., p. 15.

has to describe; and to do that validly, whether sympathetically or satirically, he must understand it. Unfortunately, his fear-inspired dislike dulls when it does not kill his understanding. His dislike does not find utterance in a biting attack, but in the hysterical wail of a defeated man."⁶ Anderson "lacks the inner hardness and determination necessary for the production of what is loosely known as art."⁷ Going into writing to escape from life, Anderson made one brief attempt (in Winesburg, Ohio) to re-enter life, "and then dashed frightened back to his refuge. . . . For Anderson was unequal to the task. To the pure metal of genuine inspiration he preferred cheap substitutes, and so returned to his world of thin romanticism and sentimentality."⁸

Of Anderson's emphasis on eroticism, Chase holds that although "Anderson thought himself a great historian of love . . . to judge by his writing his emotional experience is not great enough for the task."⁹ In fact, "his only successful treatment of this theme is when he depicts sexual frustration. His other attempts to deal with it are ridiculously inadequate."¹⁰ For all their concern with sex, then,

⁶Loc. cit.

⁷Ibid., p. 16.

⁸Ibid., p. 84.

⁹Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 80.

Anderson's books are strangely sexless, because he "subconsciously places women upon a pedestal . . . of the American and Victorian conception of marital virginity and purity" where "he can't possibly treat them as human beings."¹¹ They exist as romanticized and sentimentalized creatures in the refuge he has made for himself. Chase's final view of Anderson is that, "forced by fate to be one of the pioneer historians of modern life, for which he has no real sympathy, Anderson is in the unfortunate position of a reactionary who is striving to be 'advanced'."¹²

In his essay on Anderson in The Liberal Imagination, Lionel Trilling maintains that the failure of Anderson was due to the limitations of his vision. Anderson "suffered the fate of the writer who at one short past moment has had a success with a simple idea which he allowed to remain simple and become fixed."¹³ That idea was the significance and wonder of his gesture of renunciation in 1912. He thus joined the tradition of men like William Blake, Walt Whitman and D. H. Lawrence who "maintain a standing quarrel with respectable society and have a perpetual bone to pick with the rational intellect."¹⁴ However, "Anderson never understood

¹¹Ibid., p. 21.

¹²Ibid., p. 15.

¹³Lionel Trilling, "Sherwood Anderson," The Liberal Imagination (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1953), p. 33.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 36.

that the moment of enlightenment and conversion--the walking out--cannot be merely celebrated but must be developed, so that what begins as an act of will grows to be an act of intelligence."¹⁵ And "what exasperates us in Anderson is his stubborn, satisfied continuance in his earliest [adolescent] attitudes."¹⁶ The theory that Anderson suffered an emotional and intellectual arrest is supported, Trilling would agree, by Anderson's amazing ignorance of past world cultures and literature.¹⁷ His adolescent hero-worship of "a few anonymous Negroes, a few craftsmen . . . and a few racing drivers, of whom Pop Geers was the chief . . . does not make an adequate antagonism to the culture which Anderson opposes, and in order to make it compelling and effective, Anderson reinforced it with what is in effect the high language of religion."¹⁸ However, as with his original "simple idea," what he was speaking about was after all only "the salvation of a small, legitimate existence, of a quiet place in the sun and moments of leisurely peace, of not being nagged and shrew-ridden, nor deprived of one's due share of

¹⁵Loc. cit.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁸Loc. cit.

affection."¹⁹

Attacking Anderson's first line of defense, Trilling maintains that his narrative prose "is not really a colloquial idiom, although it has certain colloquial tricks."²⁰ Its "old slang" and its "elegant mannerisms" constitute a false naïvete the purpose of which is to make us "doubt our familiarity with our own world . . . to make [things] seem puzzling to us and remote from us," and to make us "give up our usual and on the whole useful conceptual grasp of the world we get around in."²¹ Other critics have leapt to Trilling's side. Edward H. Risley says: "In much of his prose there are broken sentences--stopping at the beginning of the impossible. Decapitated paragraphs also. Sentences without verbs, static, placing the picture. In other places, as in the Winesburg, Ohio tales, there are no broken paragraphs, no phrases split off, but the reverses of direction, the stops and starts do appear."²² Risley admits that "Anderson is really a suggestive rather than an affirmative writer . . . trying to get at something beyond just plain fact or idea. . . . He confesses 'I have seldom become quite clear.' He means all the faults of style of which one

¹⁹Ibid., p. 43.

²⁰Ibid., p. 40

²¹Loc. cit.

²²Edward H. Risley, Sherwood Anderson: The Philosophy of Failure (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Harvard University, 1938), p. 27.

can accuse him, but more, he means the greater failure, the failure to get at the 'thing.'"²³ Hans Poppe puts the whole thing down to a lack of "mental stamina to strive toward a well-balanced style."²⁴ His style is emaciated by the paucity of his vocabulary and cheapened by his use of "tawdry" words (such as "queer" and "lit out") for all characters.²⁵ "All his physicians and schoolteachers who can be expected to have had a better education, talk in the same manner as all the uneducated people."²⁶ Poppe notes that he was "easily discouraged and would give up writing a story when he felt he could not do it. He resented orderliness and method because he considered these qualities opposed to artistic inspiration. He believed them to be a part of a dull, middle-class society which he had left of his own volition. He associated intellectuality with 'high-brow stuff' and he resented it."²⁷ His characters are likewise lacking in "mental stamina" and his stories "lack strong men to contrast with all the weak characters."

²³Loc. cit.

²⁴Hans W. Poppe, Psychological Motivations in the Writings of Sherwood Anderson (Unpublished Master's Thesis, University of Southern California, 1948), p. 104.

²⁵Ibid., p. 115.

²⁶Ibid., p. 118.

²⁷Ibid., p. 104.

This fact creates a depressing and false outlook on life, as if there are no healthy, strong, well-balanced people in the world, or, if they exist, that they do not deserve attention."²⁸

Poppe and Risley share Jarvis Thurston's incredulity that "Anderson, who worked so painfully to learn to handle his materials and style in a manner sufficient for the writing of his Winesburg, Ohio stories and Dark Laughter, ends his career as a writer in exactly the same place he began. In fact, it might be maintained that he ends on even a lower plane than that of Windy McPherson's Son, for he displays in his last novel all the faults of his earlier ones and a few more he has picked up on the way."²⁹ Agreeing with Chase's opinion that Anderson wrote to escape reality and with Trilling's view that Anderson was obsessed with the one idea his whole life, Thurston sums up:

At the center of Anderson's ultimate failure as a writer of fiction lies his emotional arrest at adolescence. Consequently, he tended to confuse day-dreaming with the disciplined imagination that produces art. It let the fancy wash over things (as one of his characters says about art) and it is the unbuttoned fancy and the neglect of the facts of life that make possible for Anderson the incredible scenes that completely ruin or mar his novels. Moreover, the fancy which he lets play

²⁸Loc. cit.

²⁹Jarvis A. Thurston, Sherwood Anderson: A Critical Study (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Iowa, 1946), p. 252.

is an adolescent fancy which indulges itself in board-strutting and theatricalism.³⁰

Irving Howe, whose full-length study in the American Men of Letters series is the best book on Anderson to date, wisely discriminates between what the critic's and the biographer's view of Anderson should be. "If, for the biographer, Anderson's career must seem a dramatic instance of a gifted writer impoverished by a constricting culture, the critic can rest his final decision on that small segment of Anderson's work in which he overcame these constrictions,"³¹ says Howe. Since Howe's book is a critical biography which attempts to explain Anderson in the manner of Taine as a product of the cultural forces of his time, it is not hard to guess his conclusions. Having "no ample sense of tradition," of the "whole of those inherited sources by which a writer profits, often quite unconsciously, from the efforts of the masters who have preceded him," having the misfortune to live in the "discontinuous culture" of the present, Anderson is another instance of the "incompleteness and truncation so pervasive in American culture."³² As in American culture, "the new beginning, with the hero returning from fiasco to a wife-mother or mistress-mother,

³⁰Ibid., p. 257.

³¹Irving Howe, Sherwood Anderson (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951), pp. 254-255.

³²Ibid., p. 245 ff.

whom he serenely expects to be waiting for him, is a pervasive theme in Anderson's books."³³ Seeing Anderson as a reed in the wind of cultural change, Howe believes that he manufactured "the typical day dream of Americans--the new beginning," from "each inevitable change in the Zeitgeist on which he drew so heavily . . . because he could draw so little from anything else."³⁴ In reality, "the new beginning," spelt only "personal dislocation and crisis"³⁵ for Anderson.

Because his experience was so much a reflection of his age, Anderson's life became a "culture legend which often over-shadowed his work. This legend soon became a model of the struggle for articulation . . . in which so many untutored but gifted young American writers invariably engaged."³⁶ Anderson, then, was the model for a whole generation of writers "who were trying to raise themselves to art by sheer emotion and sheer will, who suspected intellect as a cosmopolitan snare that would destroy their gift for divining America's mystic essence, and who abominated the society which had formed them but knew no counterpoise of value by which to escape its moral dominion."³⁷ It was the

³³Ibid., p. 245.

³⁴Ibid., p. 244.

³⁵Loc. cit.

³⁶Ibid., p. 246.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 246-247.

Anderson of the culture legend

who took to cultural fashion the way other novelists take to drink; who staked everything on enthusiasm and sentiment and in their absence tried awkwardly to simulate them; who saw the artist's life as an unambiguous struggle of defiant rectitude against commercial contamination; who was forever concerned with a search for freedom, but lacked the spiritual rigor to define that freedom in terms of the scope and tension it had had for the great writers of the past.³⁸

Living by this culture legend, Anderson was led into the lugubrious dronings and orgiastic outbursts of Mid-American Chants, the bohemian absurdities of Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, the utterance of pompous (and ignorant) didacticisms such as "Art is art, It is not life," and "Realism . . . is always bad art--although it may possibly be very good journalism."³⁹ This is the side of Anderson that affects his critics the way a red flag does a bull. Almost alone among them, Irving Howe realizes that, "Read for moral explication, as a guide to life, his work must seem unsatisfactory; it simply does not tell us enough."⁴⁰ The "more fruitful way" of reading his work is as "the expression of a sensitive witness to the national experience, and as the achievement of a story teller who created a small body of fiction unique in American writing for the lyrical

³⁸Ibid., p. 248.

³⁹Sherwood Anderson's Notebook (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), pp. 22, 76. Hereafter this title will be abbreviated to Notebook.

⁴⁰Howe, op. cit., p. 249.

purity of its feeling."⁴¹

III

The most striking characteristic of all Anderson criticism, it seems to me, is its failure to see clearly the true pattern of Anderson's life and literary career, his search for spiritual salvation. It is true that some critics recognize a search-motif in Anderson. Most of them, in fact, realize that in telling his story over and over again, Anderson is seeking a meaning to his own and contemporary American life. Maxwell Geismar believes Anderson was also engaged in a search for origins, but that he returned to his own origins only at the end of his career. Other critics, such as Régis Michaud, have noticed that Anderson was concerned with the "problem of deliverance."⁴² In a brief article, Clifton Fadiman uses the phrase "search for salvation"⁴³ twice, but in holding that Anderson searched in the present he fails to notice that Anderson's preoccupation with the past rendered his sense of the present ineffectual. Furthermore, Fadiman does not see that Anderson's search is national as well as individual, representative as well as personal.

The thesis of this study is that Anderson's life and

⁴²Régis Michaud, The American Novel Today (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1928), p. 187.

⁴³Clifton Fadiman, "Sherwood Anderson: The Search for Salvation," Nation, CXXXV (November 9, 1932), 454-456.

literary career follows the pattern of a search for spiritual salvation on both the personal and national levels. An apostle of regeneration and purification, Anderson was seeking in the land of his fathers "the right place and the right people,"⁴⁴ as his "poor white" Hugh McVey puts it.

Proceeding on the assumption that the relation between the man and his art is fundamental, the following chapters discuss Anderson's life and literary career, the origins of his search, and then his works as progressive stages in his search for salvation. While in a few instances the explication owes debts as indicated to previous scholars and critics of Anderson, the analysis of Winesburg, Ohio as a four-part variation on the theme of salvation is, I think, original, as is the exploration of the relationship between Whitman and Anderson.

⁴⁴Sherwood Anderson, Poor White (New York: The Modern Library, n.d.), p. 37.

CHAPTER TWO

SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S LIFE AND LITERARY CAREER

"Oh, why was I not born into a different way of life? Why do I not now live in some comfortable house in a town, perhaps with children of my own? Why are some people born, sons or daughters of the rich or well-to-do, while others must spend lives in factories or in coal mining towns?"¹

The year 1876 has no great significance in the history of the United States. The country was at peace and the economy appeared to be prospering, after the banking crash of 1873. It was a fact, of course, that in 1874 there were two and a half million unemployed. For those employed it was also a fact, none the less positive for being unassessable, that working conditions--hours, shifts, security, facilities--were deplorable. Workers had seldom made their universal complaint, too little pay for too much work, with more justification. But the murmuring of the workers was as silence compared to the wondrous tumult of America's newly born giant, Industry.

To the American businessman, 1876 was a year of consolation and encouragement, for in the presidential election of

¹Sherwood Anderson, Kit Brandon (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), p. 350.

that year Rutherford B. Hayes, the Republican candidate, beat Samuel J. Tilden by a margin of one electoral vote. Although Tilden appeared at first to have won, an electoral committee found, on a re-examination of disputed votes from four states, that the Republican candidate was victorious. It was a victory, as was General Grant's in 1869 and General Eisenhower's in 1952, for the alliance of capitalism and industry. No election, however, could solve the basic crisis of the age. As James Schevill says, "the problem of how to reconcile the Jeffersonian dream with the growing regimentation imposed by the corporations and the machines continued to hang as a specter over the land."²

On September 13 in this year 1876 one was born whose attempts to reconcile the agrarian dream and industrial regimentation were to occupy the greater part of his life. He was born in Camden, Ohio, a small, fairly prosperous agricultural town. The records of Preble County, Ohio, for that year show that I.M. Anderson and Emma Smith Anderson were the parents of a boy, Lawrence Anderson. This was the child who, on the evidence of the other Anderson children and their substantiated birthdates, was later called Sherwood.

²James Schevill, Sherwood Anderson: His Life and Work (Denver, Colo.: University of Denver Press, 1951), p. 4. Much of the biographical information in this and other chapters is drawn from Schevill's study.

At the time of his birth, Sherwood's family, though often broke, was not poor. Being broke is a temporary discomfort, being poor is a state of mind. Irwin Anderson was one who would not (and could not) get into this state of mind. When Sherwood, the third of seven children, was born, Irwin was a harness maker and dealer by trade, a Sunday school teacher by goodwill, a village band player and bar room tale teller by way of recreation. Sherwood's later accounts of his father are far too imaginative (he once referred to him as "a ruined dandy from the South"³) to be reliable. The clearest picture one can form is from the few known facts. Irwin was born and raised on a farm; schooled in West Union, Ohio; and taken as a private in the Union Army during the Civil War, enlisting with Company G of the 129th Ohio Voluntary Infantry. He was in action at Cumberland Gap and Black Fox Ford. Re-enlisting in 1864 with the Seventh Ohio Cavalry, he took part in the seige of Knoxville in 1864, and was at Plantersville and Selma, Alabama, in 1865.

After the war, Irwin enrolled for a short time as a "gentleman" in the Xenia Female College in Xenia, Ohio. Apparently he was not successful, for he soon went west, returning in 1870 to take up the harness business in Morning Sun, Ohio, where he met Emma Smith. Emma had lost her father

³Anderson, A Story Teller's Story (New York: The Viking Press, 1927), p. 3.

when she was seventeen months and had been sent out to a farm as a bound girl at eight or nine years of age. The two were married and on January 13, 1874, a son, Karl, was born. They soon moved to Camden where two more children, Stella and Sherwood, were born. In Camden, Irwin Anderson was forced out of the harness business by the competition of farm-machine factories. He was forced to become a semi-nomadic worker in factories; and this circumstance, coupled with the nature of the man, made him into a drinker, a dreamer, an actor and teller of tales.

In 1884, when young Sherwood was eight years old, the family moved to Clyde, Ohio, where Irwin was to make a new start as an itinerant house and sign painter. He was not very serious about it. Of this period, James Schevill, Anderson's biographer, says:

The townspeople liked him for his sense of humor, his charm and his stories, but they couldn't take him seriously. He was a little like a court jester, with his ardent participation in the activities of the Grand Army of the Republic, in Memorial Day Parades, and other events sponsored by the local post . . . He was courting other women. His wife suffered his vagaries in silence. The fierce determination with which she struggled to keep her family together stemmed directly from the collapse of her own family life in childhood.⁴

Two stories in Sherwood Anderson's Memoirs, "My Sister Stella" and "Brother Earl," picture the frustrated lives of

⁴Shevill, op.cit., p. 9.

the Anderson children. According to these tales, Sherwood suffered the least. After the mother died of consumption and hard work on May 10, 1895, Stella was charged with the bringing up of her younger brothers. With her brothers' financial help, she later went to college and became a schoolteacher. She then wrote to Sherwood that she had had a religious conversion, and was convinced that Jesus had appeared to her. Although she married, she felt marriage a mistake. She felt she should have become a nun instead. Soon after this she died, but her brother does not say what caused her death.

More touching is the picture of Earl. He was the boy whose arrival was deeply resented by the other boys because of the mother's health and the father's improvidence. Earl had apparently developed some sort of idée fixe that he was unwanted, unloved. He was gaunt and restless, he could not hold a job, and he could never finish anything. Shortly before Earl's death, Sherwood saw him and learned that Earl had once followed him for several blocks in New York, unable to overcome his shyness and ask for help because he felt he had already been too much of a burden to his brother.

Five years after his wife's death, Irwin left Clyde for Connorsville, Indiana. Before this time his six children (there were seven, but a boy, Fern, died in infancy) had all left Ohio. In Connorsville, Irwin remarried and had another son. On May 23, 1919, he died in the Veteran's Home at Dayton, Ohio, having had no further contact with the children

of his first marriage.

From 1884 to 1896 Sherwood was with his "aristocratically poor"⁵ family in Clyde, a farming town near Lake Erie in northern Ohio that had been settled by New Englanders. In his early years Sherwood earned the nickname of "Jobby" as a compliment to his bustling ability to find jobs that would help support the family. He was apparently an expert newspaper vendor, and already something of a businessman since he had other boys selling for him as well. His schooling had to suffer, though the reading habit was developing along with an interest in watching horse races at the Clyde Race Track. In fact, he got a job working among drivers, trainers, stable hands and swipes for the owner of a string of horses. He also worked in a bicycle plant where James Schevill says he received "his first factory experience, his first awareness of the trend towards standardization, later to be a major theme in his writing."⁶

Restless in any job for too long, on March 8, 1895, he joined the Sixteenth Infantry Regiment (Company I) of the Ohio National Guard, known in Clyde as the McPherson Guards. Membership in the Guard apparently gave a boost to one's

⁵W. A. Sutton, Sherwood Anderson's Formative Years (1876-1913) (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1943), p. 49. The author is indebted to Sutton for much information concerning Anderson's early years.

⁶Shevill, op. cit., p. 17.

social prestige, and although the Guard had been previously used to put down labor disputes in Clyde, Sherwood did not at this time question the propriety of using a National Guard as a strike-breaking agency.

About 1896, Sherwood left Clyde to try his luck in Chicago, thus setting a pattern for almost all the heroes of his books. It seems, in the light of Anderson's life and work, that his motives in going to Chicago were four, two conscious and two not entirely so. He must have realized that he was following the "big-city" drive of the small-town boy, a drive which has deepened through the centuries into a universal and, in the last century, a peculiarly American folk myth. Too, he was driven by the accomplishment or money-success motive, an equally American folk myth. He may not have been so aware that his flight to Chicago had also what one may call a down-with-Puritanism motive, a wish to escape from the stifling provincialism of Clyde into the liberating anonymity of life in Chicago. Doubtless he was even less aware that in the Ohio National Guard he had developed what Schevill calls "a sense of the vast mystical power of men in the mass,"⁷ which sense was to be the basis of a novel, Marching Men.

In 1898, however, the Spanish-American War broke out and Anderson jumped at the chance of quitting his Chicago barrel-rolling job. He wrote the captain of the Guard at Clyde to

⁷Ibid., p. 18.

notify him at his Chicago address "if by any chance this war scare amounts to anything, and the company is called."⁸ The scare did amount to something, and Anderson returned to enlist, a hero in the eyes of the townsfolk. Anderson's participation in the Spanish-American War is described in "The Capture of Caratura" (Memoirs). From his own account, it appears that his reasons for enlisting were those of loneliness, the attraction of an adventure sanctioned by society, and a youthfully altruistic feeling that he was helping liberate an oppressed people.

The war over, Anderson entered, at the age of twenty-three, the Wittenberg Academy at Springfield, Ohio. The academy was a preparatory school for Wittenberg College at which Anderson never matriculated. About all that is known of this episode, besides the fact that he made fairly good grades, is that in December, 1899, he presented a declamation, entitled "The Defense of Dreyfus," and in June, 1900, gave an oration called "Zionism", at the Academy. According to William Alfred Sutton, it was a "finely worded, scholarly address, a plea for the Jew."⁹

For a variety of reasons (boredom, incompatibility with younger students, requests of Stella for assistance, difficulties of finance), Anderson resigned from the academy and

⁸Letter published in the Clyde Enterprise.

⁹Sutton, op. cit., p. 72.

took a job as an advertising man with the Crowell Publishing Company of Chicago. This position came as a result of Anderson's clean-cut charm of personality, which Harry Simmons, Crowell's advertising manager, had detected on the number of occasions the two met in Springfield. From this job he transferred to the Frank B. White Company as a copy writer and remained with the company (which was amalgamated with the Long-Critchfield Company in 1903) for many years. Anderson wrote for Agricultural Advertising, the company's trade journal, being in charge of two columns, "Rot and Reason" (1903), and "Business Types" (1904). Of his writing at this time Hans Poppe comments

In his essays on business he showed understanding and tenderness toward the little business man and had words of sympathy for the loser. His writing was a strong mixture of slick salesmanship and homespun philosophy Among his favorite writers were Thomas Carlyle and Benjamin Franklin.¹⁰

To this point in Anderson's life there is no trace of the utter disillusionment with the motives of big business for which he was to be remembered by the literary historians.

In 1904, Anderson began the first of his many marriages by wedding Cornelia Lane of Toledo, Ohio. The couple moved to Chicago but before two years had passed Anderson was once more dissatisfied with his job and making plans to live in

¹⁰ Hans W. Poppe, Psychological Motivations in the Writings of Sherwood Anderson (Unpublished Thesis, University of Southern California, 1948), p. 11. Poppe's study has been used as a source for the present chapter.

Cleveland, Ohio, as president of the United Factories Company whose account he had handled while with Long-Critchfield. On August 16, 1907, Anderson's first child, Robert Lane Anderson, was born. At the time the father was getting ready to make still another move (to Elyria, Ohio) as head of his own mail order firm.

Cornelia and Sherwood remained in Elyria about six years. The two were modicums of middle-class respectability, well known for participation in discussion groups, church work, and the golf club. Hans Poppe reports that "He was considered a good fellow, a man's man, happy-go-lucky, jovial, something of a 'nut,' a good conversationalist who always had a story, and a charming, hospitable, modest man who was always eager to learn."¹¹ Two more children were born, John Sherwood Anderson (December 31, 1908), and Marion Anderson (October 29, 1911). In 1911 too, Anderson incorporated a new firm, the American Merchants Company, with a capital of two hundred thousand dollars. Complete control was vested in the incorporator.

By this time, however, it was common knowledge that Anderson was devoting an increasing amount of his own and his clients' time to writing. What those who came in contact with him thought of this is not hard to imagine. Possibly, though, they did not know that the glory of American business

¹¹Ibid., p. 15.

was vanishing for one of its most ardent glorifiers, that the smooth-talking salesman was attempting to explain himself to himself, that the burden of providing year in and year out for a wife and family was increasing in weight. Anderson's own explanation is: "I quit wanting to change people. I began to want more and more to understand rather than change."¹²

On Thanksgiving Day of 1912 an event took place which was to prove the most important in Anderson's life and a significant one in the history of American literature. In the middle of the dictation of a business letter to his secretary, Anderson quit the office of his Elyria paint firm and disappeared completely for three days. To Hans Poppe, Anderson was presumably suffering "from some form of insanity or aphasia," and

As revealed in his story "Brother Earl," it was also a flight from a feeling of guilt because the money of small investors had been lost in Anderson's stock-investing schemes. This idea of a spectacular exit appears to have been on Anderson's mind for some time.¹³

To James Schevill, the episode has "assumed the aspect of a myth, the revolt from business morality."¹⁴

¹²Anderson in a letter of 1938 to Mary H. Dinsmoor, An Inquiry into the Life of Sherwood Anderson as Reflected in His Literary Works. (Unpublished Thesis, University of Ohio, 1939), p. 47.

¹³Poppe, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁴Shevill, op. cit., p. 55.

To the physicians of the Huron Road Hospital in Cleveland, where Anderson was found wandering, "he was suffering from nervous exhaustion. . . . His clothes were bedraggled and his appearance unkempt. To the questions asked . . . Anderson replied incoherently."¹⁵ To a reporter for the Elyria Evening Telegram of December 6, 1912, Anderson is alleged to have said that he threw himself into a trance, adding that, "It is dangerous, but it will be a good story and the money will always be welcome."¹⁶ According to Anderson, in a version he gives of the episode in A Story Teller's Story, he said to his secretary, "My feet are cold, wet and heavy from long wading in a river. Now I shall go walk on dry land."¹⁷ He explained that, "I am going to wander about. I am going to sit with people, listen to words, tell tales of people, what they are thinking, what they are feeling. The devil! It may even be that I am going forth in search of myself."¹⁸

Severing formally his connection with the paint firm, Anderson left for Chicago and another advertising job in February, 1913. In April of that year he was followed by

¹⁵Article entitled "Elyria Man is Found Dazed in Cleveland" in Elyria Evening Telegram for December 2, 1912.

¹⁶Article in Elyria Evening Telegram for December 6, 1912.

¹⁷P. 313.

¹⁸P. 311.

his wife, Cornelia, and children. The delay in reunion emphasizes the truth that the couple were becoming estranged. Cornelia, they both knew, had had the better education, and her attempts to take the 'country' out of Anderson were often not given in the spirit sought and often not appreciated in the spirit given. He realised that she was his intellectual superior, and in a state of bewilderment, bitterness, and helplessness, his old feeling of inferiority grew. In "Man With a Book" (Memoirs), he declares that his wife did not understand him sufficiently, that she had wrong values, and that hers was the blame for the divorce that became inevitable.

It was an older Anderson (thirty-seven now) who went to a changed Chicago. Anderson himself is the best chronicler of the significance of Chicago at this time:

It became the city of my young manhood. Chicago is unformed, it is terrible. There is something terrible about the making of every great city . . . And Chicago is still making. Yet when it is formed it will not be another New York, Paris, London. It will be Chicago. Here I am. Go to hell. In its very terribleness, it is at moments beautiful in a way apparent only when you have lived there a long time. When you have been sick of it to the very marrow and accepted it, then at last, walking hopeless, endless streets--yourself hopeless--you begin to feel its beauty, its half-wild beauty. The beauty of the loose and undisciplined, unfinished and unlimited. Something half-wild and very alive in yourself is there, too. The city you have dreaded and feared is like you own soul.

.

When I visit any other city of the world, I am a guest.

When I am in Chicago, I am at home. It is a little what I am. I am more than a little what Chicago is. No man can escape this city.¹⁹

At this time, too, in Chicago, a literary renaissance was taking place. Stimulated by the discrepancy, then obvious at all social levels, between business morality in theory and in fact, or as Schevill puts it, between "the prim, surface conventions and the actual, ruthless manipulation of human lives caused by the overwhelming power that was available through control of the machine,"²⁰ the country's literature of protest took on new life. In the area of the novel, Theodore Dreiser was publishing works like Jennie Gerhardt (1911) and reissuing Sister Carrie (suppressed since 1900). In poetry, the work of men like Vachel Lindsay, Ezra Pound, Robert Frost, Carl Sandburg, William Carlos Williams, and T.S. Eliot was beginning to make itself felt in the Chicago magazines, Poetry and the Little Review. What Anderson called the "Robin's Egg Renaissance" of humanitarianism against capitalism was finding its equivalent in the arts. The "enduring structure" behind both renaissances was, according to Schevill, "the slow influx into American minds of revolutionary European ideas about the nature of man and the universe."²¹ The psycho-

¹⁹Sherwood Anderson, Memoirs (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 109.

²⁰Shevill, op. cit., p. 66.

²¹Ibid., p. 68.

analytic work of Freud, Jung, Ferenczi, Bull, and Jones, the work on space-time relativity of Einstein, and the experimental psychological novels of Joyce and Proust were being discussed. At this time, however, Anderson was strictly a tyro in the new learning. He had read almost nothing by the Russians (and later claimed he read them only to discover in what ways they were said to have influenced him), knew Flaubert and Balzac only by name, and was only slightly acquainted with Hawthorne, Melville and Whitman. In addition, it was a standing joke of his happily to flaunt his ignorance of Freud in the face of those of his critics who persistently detected the latter's influence in his work. His reading of these years favored the early novels of H.G. Wells, George Moore's Confessions of a Young Man, and George Borrow's novels of gypsy life.

Anderson's hobnobbing with the Chicago literati of those days produced acquaintanceships with such people as Ben Hecht, Arthur Davison Ficke, Eunice Tietjens, Carl Sandburg, Theodore Dreiser, H.L. Mencken, Lewis Galantière, Margery Currie and her husband, Floyd Dell. Dell admired Anderson's Windy McPherson's Son for the soul-questioning, Dostolevskian note he thought it contained and took the manuscript to New York with him in 1913. Despite Dell's efforts, it was not until 1916 that it was finally accepted, by the John Lane Company, for publication in a first edition

of twenty-five hundred copies. Although some reviews (of the "our-own-Dostoevsky" type) were by no means indifferent, the reading public was quite noticeably so. In 1917 Marching Men was published with a somewhat similar reception.

From 1913 to 1918 Anderson supported himself with the advertising job, wrote in his own and some of the boss' time, and continued his friendships among the intellectual set. He spent the 1912-1913 winter in the Ozarks in a successful effort to stave off a nervous breakdown, which the collapse of his marriage and his growing resentment of the commercial world had threatened to bring on. It was possibly the hillbillies but more likely a typically chameleon whim born of introspective isolation that was responsible for his returning to Chicago, a bearded, flamboyantly garbed bohemian. Anderson was delighted with the change; his associates were merely astonished. In spite of the world, he was now the artiste, and, as if to testify to this, his first published story, "The Rabbit Pen," appeared in Harpers in July, 1914. This period also produced a second marriage, to a sculptress named Tennessee Mitchell. Founded on the psychology of the behaviorists, and a reading of Bertrand Russell's Marriage and Morals, it was to be a bohemian arrangement of come-and-go-as-you-please. This marriage did not last quite as long as the first.

The year 1918 saw the publication of both his least and most impressive volumes. Mid-American Chants, most of which was written in 1916 and 1917, completed his three volume contract

with the John Lane Company and also the first phase of Anderson's literary career. Winesburg, Ohio, most of which was also written in 1916 and 1917, was Anderson's first book for B.W. Huebsch, and is undoubtedly his highest achievement. The reviewers in general were apathetic; the public, taking its cue from comments such as the New York Sun's that "Mr. Anderson has reduced his material from human clay to plain dirt,"²² was morally indignant.

Anderson continued to meet people. In 1917 he met Van Wyck Brooks and began a six-year correspondence. In the same year he met Paul Rosenfeld through Waldo Frank. He continued to change jobs. In 1918 his boyhood friend, John Emerson, got him a job as a publicity man with a Long Island film company. In 1919 he was back in Chicago with the Critchfield agency, this time as a commercial traveller. He continued to sicken of the advertising business, feeling by now that the writing of advertising copy was harmful to his creative talent. He continued to travel. In January, 1920, he was in Mobile, Alabama, recovering from a bad case of influenza and finishing Poor White, the novel he had begun as a publicity man on Long Island.

In 1921 he made his first trip to Europe. There he met Gertrude Stein and James Joyce, whose effect on Anderson is most obvious in Dark Laughter (1925). In the same year, he

²²Quoted Schevill, op. cit., p. 110.

won the Dial short story prize of two thousand dollars and had his second collection of short stories, The Triumph of the Egg, published. Four and a half thousand copies sold in six months. The trip to Europe had prompted a new attempt to break with the past, and from New York he fled to New Orleans, thus escaping the responsibility and irksomeness of job and wife. In New Orleans he continued Many Marriages and contemplated writing a book to be called Threads, "a series of satirical comments on American literary life."²³

In the summer of 1923 he moved from Chicago to Cleveland, where he met Hart Crane, a correspondent of his since 1919. In 1923, Many Marriages was published and sold nine thousand copies in three months. In the same year Anderson was in Reno to divorce Tennessee and marry Elizabeth Prall, though Tennessee's forestalling kept the divorce from coming through until April, 1924. In 1923, too, Anderson's third volume of stories, Horses and Men, was published. In 1924 he began a book on Lincoln, a figure who had occupied his imagination for a long time, but quickly discarded it and saw to the publication of the autobiography, A Story Teller's Story. In 1925 he was in New Orleans writing Dark Laughter, renewing acquaintances with the Double Dealer staff, and making the acquaintance of William Faulkner, who was at that time turning out rather bad Swinburnian poetry. In 1925, he was forced to do two months

²³Ibid., p. 155.

of itinerant lecturing to bring in money, though the publication of Dark Laughter alleviated his indigence more than somewhat. Dark Laughter was published by Horace Liveright who managed to promote advance sales of five thousand copies and subsequently to sell twenty-eight thousand of the regular and fifteen thousand of the reprint editions. The book was far and away Anderson's best seller.

Anderson was responsible for the publication by Liveright of Faulkner's first book, Soldier's Pay, and Hemingway's In Our Time, a short story collection modelled on the method of Winesburg, Ohio. Liveright was not in favor of publishing Hemingway, but Anderson prevailed. Hemingway's gratitude was expressed in the form of a book length parody of Anderson's Dark Laughter which he called The Torrents of Spring (1926).

Dark Laughter, for all the patent absurdity Hemingway saw in it, brought Anderson quite a deal of European recognition. The book was the first in his new "experimental" style--cynical in mood, sophisticated in outlook, fragmentary in form. With Many Marriages, the book must also be the basis of any discussion of Anderson's relationship with Sigmund Freud and D.H. Lawrence. The new style was not to be permanent, and Schevill suggests that it was adopted by Anderson because, "in the deep question of literary aesthetics, of a style and form that would be truly representative of the American tradition he wanted to maintain and further,

he was by no means secure."²⁴

In 1925 Anderson built a home at Ripshin Farm in Marion County, Virginia. In the winter of 1925-1926 he made another lecture tour and published his lecture-essay, The Modern Writer. In 1926, he edited and had published Sherwood Anderson's Notebook, a collection of short pieces written for such magazines as the Double Dealer, the Seven Arts, the Literary Review and Vanity Fair. In this year he was also at work on his second autobiography, Tar: a Midwestern Childhood, and making several unsuccessful starts on a book to be called Another Man's House.

December of 1926 found him and Elizabeth off on a second European trip. Three main reasons for the trip can be discerned: to let his son John, who wanted to paint, see European art; to see to publication details of translations of some of his books; and to give a long-adamant Muse, rested from Anderson's importuning, the chance of inspiring him upon his return to Marion. To the reader of Anderson the trip was chiefly important for the opportunity it gave him to meet Frank Swinnerton and Arnold Bennett, to have a happy reunion with Gertrude Stein and rather unfortunate ones with Hemingway and Joyce. Hemingway had become too self-centered and was unrepentant for his parody, while his evening with Joyce was a total failure despite Anderson's consenting to eat oysters, a dish he

²⁴Schevill, op. cit., p. 208.

detested.

In 1927 he was back in the United States, grieving over the death of his brother Earl, publishing a second volume of poems, A New Testament, most of which he had written in the early 'twenties, and purchasing two small country newspapers. As usual, Anderson was hard-pressed for funds, so the papers were bought with a loan from Burton Emmett which was in part repaid in original manuscripts the author let Emmett have for his collection. Anderson spent all of 1928 editing these papers: it was the first time a writer of his stature had owned, operated and edited a country newspaper. Of this period Hans Poppe notes:

The course of Sherwood Anderson's development as a writer came in this manner to a close. It was almost a perfect circle. In Chicago he dealt with farmers and small-town people in order to sell them whatever he had to advertise, and now he dealt again with farmers and small-town people. He reported their comings and goings, wrote them pleasant editorials, and made them feel that he was one of them.²⁵

Anderson could not persuade his Muse to return. His output was limited to newspaper editorials, some of which were collected and published under the title Hello Towns! (1929). The book did not sell. His marriage with Elizabeth Prall was breaking up. It was the third to go that way. In late 1929 he was forcing himself to work on a novel the title of which needs no comment. It was to be

²⁵Poppe, op. cit., p. 110.

called No Love but was published (in 1932) as Beyond Desire. Not satisfied with himself or his writing, he went to St. Petersburg, Florida, and began another novel, No God. In December of that year Tennessee was found dead in Chicago. She had been living alone and was not found for several days after death. It is hard to suppress a cruel or patronizing smile at the number and dolefulness of the misfortunes in the above sequence: it seems a little too close to the vie manquée of the artiste to be entirely ingenuous. And yet it would be grossly naïve to suppose Anderson willfully sacrificed peace of mind, self-respect, domestic felicity, and money in order to strike a pose of which he had possibly only a vague understanding.

For fresh stimulus, Anderson turned to the workers, the "defeated people,"²⁶ as he called them. His interest in the workers was in turn stimulated by his meeting with Eleanor Copenhaver, a staff member of the National YWCA and a campaigner for better conditions amongst women industrial workers. He plunged directly into the conflict between management and workers by making a speech in January, 1931, to participators in the famous Danville, Virginia, strike. From his lectures and reflections of 1931 emerged an essay, Perhaps Women, the thesis of which was that women might be able

²⁶Sherwood Anderson, Letters, eds. Howard Mumford Jones and Walter B. Rideout (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), p. 204.

to provide answers to the problems of industrialization. This possibly led to his being asked to take the negative in a public debate in New York with Bertrand Russell on the question, "Should the home be abolished?" Edified by the failure of his recent bohemian marriage, Anderson defended the home against institutionalized training of children.

In August of 1932 Anderson left for Europe again, this time as a member of the American delegation to the Communist-controlled meeting of the "World's Congress Against War." Believing that the workers could maintain peace, that it was possible to work with the Communists against the Fascists, and that the cause of the American worker might somehow be brought into the light, Anderson consented to have his fare paid to the Congress in Amsterdam which, ironically enough, concluded the same day as Captain Goering of the Nazi party was elected president of the Reichstag.

Back in America, he turned his two papers over to his son Robert who had been his helper and stand-in for some time. Sensing that the creative impulse was running pure again, Anderson readied Beyond Desire for publication, worked on the Book of Days, a work on the Winesburg pattern in which the important event in every day of a year was to be described, and began a novel entitled Thanksgiving (after Eleanor had recovered from an illness). The Book of Days did not come off, possibly because three hundred and sixty-five variations

on even the Winesburg pattern are apt to seem somewhat repetitious, while Thanksgiving was abandoned in Kansas City, Missouri, where Eleanor was making an industrial survey for the YWCA, in favor of what ultimately proved to be a far worthier project. From a story written in 1926, Anderson took the title Death in the Woods as that of another short story collection. Unfortunately, sales for the book were poor because the collapse of Liveright's publishing firm coincided with its publication.

Having married Eleanor Copenhaver (in July of 1933) and espoused her cause, Anderson did a series of articles in a roving-reporter style for Today, a magazine which its supporters claimed to be "an American political weekly, independent of, although sympathetic with the administration"²⁷ (which was that of Franklin D. Roosevelt). Many of Anderson's articles were concerned with projects of the New Deal and may be found in a collection entitled Puzzled America brought out by Scribners. In this year, 1934, the dramatized Winesburg, Ohio was produced (after much rewriting had partly convinced Anderson that his was not a theatrical avocation) by Jasper Deeter at the Hedgerow Theatre of Pennsylvania. The play was published in 1937 with some others under the title Winesburg and Other Plays, and was revived on Broadway recently.

²⁷Letter of 1933 to Anderson from Raymond Moley. Quoted Schevill, op. cit., p. 309.

In 1934, too, another collection of articles, No Swank, was published. Its titlepiece was a tribute to the Henry Wallace of the early thirties.

Of the last years of his life, 1935-1941, his biographer, James Schevill, says:

The main pattern of Anderson's life became set. He could not control his restlessness. In the winters Eleanor and he were off on trips to warmer climates. In the spring they returned to the peace of Ripshin Farm. To earn money he continued to write many short articles, but in his mind raged the doubts about the loss of his creative ability.²⁸

Anderson had always been a nomad though, and the places where he wrote his books plot the course of his wanderings: Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men were written in Elyria; Winesburg, Ohio and Mid-American Chants in Chicago; The Triumph of the Egg in Mobile; A Story Teller's Story in Reno; Many Marriages in New Orleans; Tar, Beyond Desire and Kit Brandon in Marion.

Towards the end of his life, Anderson became increasingly depressed by a feeling of the artist's isolation in society. He had had the feeling since his Chicago days, had formulated it in The Modern Writer. He had been aware of it again each time a visit to Europe disclosed what he believed a modern republic of letters should be. But now he was a sixty-year-old man saddened by the loss through suicide (to which he

²⁸Shevill, Ibid., p. 317.

felt sure neglect and isolation had contributed) of the poets Vachel Lindsay (in 1931) and Hart Crane (in 1932). The early deaths of Thomas Wolfe (in 1939) and of Scott Fitzgerald (in 1940), neither of whom had yet reached his full artistic potential, were further blows. As an attempt to do something about the artist's isolation, Anderson accepted the editorship of the American Spectator in 1933. At this time the Spectator was being handled by such men as George Jean Nathan, Ernest Boyd, and Theodore Dreiser.

A further attempt to assist communication between writers was his supervision of the fiction section of the Writers' Conference held in Boulder, Colorado, in 1937. During this year and the next he continued his writing activities, still concentrating wrongheadedly on long pieces of fiction. How Green the Grass and Men and Their Women were both begun and abandoned in a matter of months. He began to dictate the Memoirs to Eleanor. In 1940 he published Home Town, a work similar to Hello Towns! in its use of the seasonal cycle as a structural basis. But his reputation and his income were falling even further. He was listed in Class A (the lowest) in the ratings of the Author's League of America which meant that his income from writing ranged from one to five thousand dollars per annum.

On February 28, 1941, he and Eleanor sailed from New York on board the Santa Lucia bound for South America. It was to

be a vacation for the two of them, as well as a goodwill tour by Anderson with the unofficial backing of the State Department and the chance to sell articles concerning South America on his return. He was put ashore at Cristobel and taken to the Military Hospital in the Panama Canal Zone ailing from peritonitis caused by a piece of toothpick (swallowed at a farewell party in New York) penetrating and lodging in his intestines. He died on March 7, 1941, aged sixty-four years. His last work, the Memoirs, appeared in March, 1942. It did not get the good reception it deserved.

The foregoing has been an attempt to set forth uncritically the biographical data of Anderson's life. The following chapters will attempt to appraise Anderson's contribution to American literature. Because the writer believes that a complementary understanding of an author's life and work has rarely been as essential as in Anderson's case, the remainder of the dissertation will veer constantly towards the biographical to explain the individual nature of his art.

One must add, though, that when he is on the subject of himself, there is often a difference between what Anderson says happened and what actually did happen. It was Anderson's peculiar talent to be able to combine fact and fancy in his books in a way that often defies analysis. Although his novels are obviously autobiographical, Anderson was careful not to label them definitively so. The advantage in this was,

as he saw it, two-fold: he could deny, for whatever reasons he pleased, that he ever intended a factual rendition of his life, and he could refine his imaginative renditions of his life as he imagined the story from novel to novel.

However, if one is to consider Anderson's novels in an autobiographical light, a consistent position of interpretation must be taken up. Perhaps some kind of sliding scale can be devised to gauge verisimilitude. At one end of the scale is pure fact, and at the other pure fancy. Once this position is established, the further reservation must be made that Anderson often simply leaves out those facts which he considers to be inimical to the image he is projecting of himself in a given book. This, of course, is the fiction writer's prerogative which no intelligent reader will deny. Again, despite the sifting process Anderson's experience was constantly undergoing in his mind and work, he will often let some of the metal slip through with the dross. As Sutton has noticed, many significant experiences (for example, his years in the Ohio National Guard and the Wittenberg Academy) are either omitted or glossed over very quickly. Sutton is right when he sees Anderson's army experience as a source for the novel, Marching Men.²⁹ The same scholar's conjecture that the Wittenberg year had something to do with the development of Anderson's writing talent (one

²⁹Sutton, op. cit., p. 220.

recalls his prize-winning speeches) is doubtless to the point also.³⁰ But Anderson was unaware of any obvious or hidden significance in either case, and, as Sutton says, these experiences "seemed quite unimportant and remote when Anderson thought of writing about them."³¹ Similarly, those very important years from 1900 to 1906 in Chicago are treated very haphazardly. He never even mentions his first marriage in 1904. If this omission can be explained by his later wish to respect the privacy of his first wife, then how explain the fact that he does not discuss much more fully his thought and activity in this first period of literary awakening.

The Elyria period is likewise treated sketchily from a factual point of view. According to Sutton it is also the "most falsified." It was a "crucial period," and Anderson's memories must have been vivid, but the "pressures involved were so great that there was ample temptation for him to rationalize and then change his story in accordance with that rationalization."³² Anderson's wife is never more than a shadow forbidden to materialize, his friends appear to be merely sounding boards for the Anderson ego, and his

³⁰Ibid., p. 225.

³¹Loc. cit.

³²Ibid., p. 226.

business is treated only in the broadest generality. Sutton understates the case when he says that, "It is certain that his interest in presenting the story of his life to his readers was not such as to make him persevere in the clear delineation of every phase of it."³³

He had no desire to write a full and frank confession; and this is the reason why he in no way rivals a Saint Augustine or a Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the genre of confessional literature, even though he spent the greater part of his life telling and retelling his story. Anderson shows the reader only what will contribute to the impression he wants to be taken away.

³³Ibid., p. 227.

CHAPTER THREE

ORIGINS OF THE SEARCH

"I have wanted this unity of things, this song, this earth, this sky, this human brotherhood."¹

The pattern of Anderson's life and literary career may be seen as a search for personal and national salvation. Broadly speaking, Anderson's search for salvation was inspired by motives he shared with many American writers: an aspiration toward universal community, a longing for a past state of innocence, and a compulsive desire for artistic self-realization. In terms of American literary history these motives may be called the "literary" sources of Anderson's search.

There were also more personal origins of his quest. What prompted and sustained the search as much as the "literary" motives mentioned above were three psychological motives. These three were: Anderson's need for new roots after the rejection of his own, his need for public recognition, and his need for a high purpose in life to counteract his failures in personal relationships.

¹Sherwood Anderson, Memoirs (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1942), p. 180.

It is easy to say that there is a purely personal motive behind every direction that Anderson's search takes. One can say, for example, that Anderson's inability to cope with the present has something to do with his searching for the pre-industrial past, and that his rejection of his personal origins is a factor in his pre-occupation with the realization of the self. But as closely as Anderson's personal and literary life are related, it is always wise to remember that there are two Andersons. One is the Anderson who detested his upbringing, divorced his wives, deserted his children, and became a literary vagabond who had a talent for turning words into money when the need arose. Another is the Anderson who stood for literary integrity and whose life and work constitute an image of the artist opposing the accepted values of his age.² Actually both of these are part of the legend of Anderson which was re-lived later by Thomas Wolfe and a whole generation of young writers. (San Francisco's "Beat Generation" is the present incarnation of the legend). Most of Anderson's critics find the legend unacceptable because it is an attempt to justify to society the "phony" ethics of bohemia. It is almost impossible to make a satisfactory distinction between the personal and literary elements of the Anderson legend; but for the sake of his

²Horace Gregory evaluates the legend of Anderson in his introduction to The Portable Sherwood Anderson (New York: The Viking Press, 1949), pp. iii-xxvii.

genuine literary significance, let us look at the literary and personal origins of his search for salvation separately.

II

In the first place, Anderson's search for personal and national salvation was inspired by the idea of universal communion within a universal community. "It seems to me," he wrote, "that the essential point of living is to draw closer to others."³ People can "find each other through a universal participation."⁴ Yet to Anderson, universal communion was impossible in twentieth century society which was not a community but a vast number of souls hermetically isolated from one another. It was the machine that had brought about this condition. Deadening their responses to life and to each other, dehumanizing them by its demands for impersonal allegiance, the machine had changed men from a community of craftsmen into an impersonal group of statistics on a financial report. Man's neurotic feelings of isolation, loneliness, and frustration in the twentieth century were the result. The people who succumb to these are Anderson's "grotesques." They are people who refuse to live complacently and unthinkingly according to the values of the re-organized society. Winesburg, Ohio is concerned with these "grotesques," or outsiders, and their search for communion with others. Their

³News clipping in Newberry Collection.

⁴Kit Brandon, p. 94.

search is unsuccessful because the machine has brought standardization and conventionalism into society to such a degree that the "grotesques" can no longer be tolerated.

This problem of the alienation of the individual is central to the novel, Poor White. Hugh McVey is a modern phenomenon--the individual who is indispensable to his society but spiritually remote from it. Hugh is a larger-than-life myth of his times, a symbol of Midwestern America trying to solve the problem of its times. It is significant in this respect that Anderson tried to make McVey a Lincolnesque character.

The theme of alienation-isolation runs through all of Anderson's works, and the failure of his characters to overcome their isolation reflects a failure on Anderson's part to overcome his special kind of isolation--that of the artist in America. The distinctive gift of Anderson's characters is the reason both for their success in and rejection of the new industrial age. Success proves hollow and leads to rejection. Rejection in turn leads to a positive search for salvation in some elemental principle of life which has endured since Old Testament days. Thus Sam McPherson decides that his salvation lies in the care and raising of children, Beaut McGregor that his lies in organizing a brotherhood of men, and Bruce Dudley that his lies in family responsibility. Like Anderson, these people are all "artists" at odds with a society which, he maintains, has "nothing whatever to do with the arts,

justice, equality, morality,"⁵ which is fickle in its loyalty even to those it esteems, and which is willing to recognize only a new or a dead talent. The American people, he wrote in 1921, "have always been most fearfully afraid of being called cultural. The idea has become mixed up in our heads with the study of geometry, the translation of Homer in schools, and such things."⁶

Artists, Anderson felt, were not only isolated from society but from each other. The nation had no artistic centre for the establishment, enrichment, and dissemination of culture as France had in Paris, or as England had in London. The lack of a geographical rallying point contributed to the lack of ideological rallying points, and prevented men of letters and the arts from having any concerted influence, either wanted or unwanted, on issues they considered crucial. The full realization of how small a voice the writer had in America was brought home to Anderson through his part in the labor disputes of the 1930's.

Finding the present unacceptable, Anderson's outsiders invariably turn to the past in their search for "the right

⁵Sherwood Anderson, Hello Towns! (New York: Horace Liveright, 1929), p. 326.

⁶Anderson, Sherwood Anderson's Notebook (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1926), p. 148. Hereafter this title will be abbreviated to Notebook.

place and the right people," amongst whom they hope to find salvation. For Anderson, "the right place" was never in the twentieth century; but before discussing where he considered "the right place" to be, one finds it necessary to list his grievances against the wrong place. The list is very long, but it can be reduced to one word--industrialism. Materialism, standardization, conformity, mediocrity; the suppression of individualism, of sex, and of creativity; the phenomena of intellectual and physical degeneration and even impotence in the American male; the artists' "selling out" of themselves, of each other, and of the public imagination--all these were the evil fruits of industrialism that had enticed man away from his pre-industrial Eden. All of Anderson's thought and work is predicated on the reality of this evil.

But Anderson is far from being a total iconoclast. If his indictment of his own age is powerful, his nostalgic evocation of a pre-industrial American Garden of Eden is even stronger. Anderson composed many lyrical passages evoking the quality of this past age, the image of which is as a memory of childhood innocence. For example in Poor White he writes:

In the days before the coming of industry, before the mad awakening, the towns of the Middle West were sleepy, devoted to the practice of the old trades, to agriculture and to merchandizing. In the morning the men of the towns went forth to work in the fields or to the practice of the

trade of carpentry, horse-shoeing, wagon-making, harness-repairing, and the making of shoes and clothing. They read books and believed in a God born in the brains of men who came out of a civilization much like their own. On the farms and in the houses in the towns the men and women worked together toward the same ends in life. . . . After one of the poor little houses had been lived in for a long time, after children had been born and men had died, after men and women had suffered and had moments of joy together in the tiny rooms under the low roofs, a subtle change took place. The houses became almost beautiful in their old humanness.⁷

Poor White is a record of the disappearance of this image.

One is thus reminded that Anderson is not only a member of the "revolt-from-the-village" school of writers, but of the "return-to-the-village" school as well. Those critics who saw Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio as a revolt from the village were unconscious of the pattern of Anderson's work as a whole. When the goal that inspired the revolt proves worthless or unattainable, Anderson's heroes seek to identify with some image, like that quoted above, of a Golden Age where the lost, half-hidden and half-forgotten loveliness of American life is to be found. Anderson examines his own and the national consciousness, changes his environment, constantly puts out feelers, in an effort to find what has been lost, to find salvation in "the

⁷Sherwood Anderson, Poor White (New York: The Modern Library, nd), pp. 131-132.

right place" and among "the right people."⁸

The third origin of Anderson's search for salvation is in his anxiety for a means of literary and artistic self-realization. He wanted self-realization in the dual sense of awareness and fulfillment. In awareness and fulfillment, Anderson's experience amounts to an unfailing effort of a man to understand himself and his world, and to realize his potentialities as an artist. This is one reason why his books are all more or less autobiographies --each one represents an attempt at self-realization, and hence salvation, through art. As Anderson's time runs short, and the self remains artistically unrealized, his books become increasingly introspective, increasingly personal. Anderson's potentialities were probably not as great as he liked to think of them--in his most confident moods (in Mid-American Chants, for example) he thought of himself as an almost divinely endowed singer and representative of the spirit of Midwestern America, a kind of twentieth-century Moses leading his people to salvation. The truth is, however, that Anderson's books were read by

⁸It is tempting to see Anderson's search as a search for a "usable past" (his friend Van Wyck Brooks' familiar concept). However, Anderson's mood is one of nostalgia and reminiscence, not scrutiny. And his search is confined to the last two or three decades of the nineteenth century which was not so much the historical past as the time of his own youth. Irving Howe notes that when asked about a "usable past," Anderson was "afraid I do not know what you mean by 'usable past'". Irving Howe, Sherwood Anderson (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951), p. 245.

only a few of the American people and those few saw in him not the selflessness of a true seeker but the introspective murmurings of a man uncertain of the way to salvation and badly worried about his qualifications as a leader. The question of the right way to take is answered by each of the four stages of Anderson's quest. Is it through the struggles of each individual, asks Sam McPherson; or of the mass? asks Beaut McGregor. Is there "hope in the corn," in persuading men to throw off the industrial yoke? Is there a chance for self-realization in sexual freedom, in "the white wonder of life"? Is there, finally, a chance in a man's becoming part of the people or of a cause of the people?

These three object-ideals (community, the past, and self-realization) are not only central to Anderson's works but to American culture from about the time of the Civil War. One notices them recurring with increasing frequency and emphasis in contemporary life and literature. If these three concepts are central to American culture today, perhaps it is not pretentious to make a similar claim for the man whose sustained statement of them has already assured him a central place in the history of American literature.

II

The more strictly personal origins of Anderson's search for salvation--the need for new roots, the need for recog-

nitition, and the need to escape a troublous personal life-- can be discussed more briefly.

His need for new cultural, spiritual, and psychological roots was the result of Anderson's feeling of the inadequacy of his status. He was one of seven children of a "poor white" house painter of rural Ohio. Irwin Anderson never had anything, never was anything but a fatuous old tale-teller and bar room braggart. His son came to regard his childhood as having been a hard, humiliating experience and rejected from his psyche all that had to do with the disturbing example of his father. Irwin was responsible for all of his children leaving Clyde as soon as they could to face the challenge of the city. For the same reasons, the heroes of Anderson's first three books (Windy McPherson's Son, Marching Men, and Poor White) leave their American village for the city. For Anderson, the artist's life was the best way to dissociate himself from his origins. "The only thing that saves me from being a plain son-of-a-bitch," he once said, "is that I am as much as any man that ever lived--an artist."⁹

But as the pattern of his life came to resemble his father's, and as his literary forte proved to be tale-telling

⁹Quoted by Schevill, op. cit., p. 302.

(the kind of thing his father did so well), he realized that he had not escaped his origins at all, that he was in fact a true son of his father. With this realization came also a softening (in A Story Teller's Story and Tar, for example) in the pictures he drew of his father.

Irwin's shiftlessness is called having fun; his boastfulness, loquacity--in short, the pernicious old scoundrel of Windy McPherson's Son becomes merely a "character."

And this gradual and sly softening of the memory of his father is consistent with the fluctuating attitude of Anderson toward his origins. His life was both an attempt to escape from and return to his origins. When he thought he could, he tried very hard to escape; when he failed in this he tried equally hard to accept his beginnings. All his heroes attempt to escape their origins, and at the end all go back to them. But the way the origins are remembered is not the way they were. What Anderson does for himself and his heroes is to alter the true image of origin (his alteration of his father's image is a case in point) to the kind of thing just quoted from Poor White. It is this romanticized image that Sam, Beaut, and the rest of them are setting out to find as their stories close. And as Anderson becomes exhausted by his search, as his own story is about to close, he settles into a life in Virginia that is a romanticized version of his own origins. Since

in Marion his social position was that of a country gentleman, and since his owning land there amounted to a final refutation of that "worthless kind of person,"¹⁰ his father, it is clear that Anderson was accepting his origins on his own terms. His inability to escape his origins, then, was one reason why Anderson's search for "the right place and the right people," the old loveliness of American life, always took him back to the time of his youth just before the giant, Industry, awoke.

His taking up residence in Marion, Virginia, was also a way of being recognized, a way of being someone. "If you want to be someone in this world," says Tar, "own land, own goods."¹¹ All Anderson's life his desire was "to be someone." He wanted to be recognized for what he believed he was and paid accordingly. It is a curious paradox that Anderson was always bedevilled by the success-motive which drove his early heroes to success then left their lives devoid of meaning. Personal ambition, the need for prestige and acclaim, the need of a gifted country boy to be appreciated by people of worldly discrimination, played a large part in Anderson's literary career and, perhaps as much as his constant need of money, kept him writing

¹⁰ Sherwood Anderson, Tar: A Midwest Childhood (New York: Albert and Charles Boni, 1930), p. 41.

¹¹ Loc. cit.

longer than he should have. Anderson had the poor boy's desire to be a rich boy, yet the only congenial way he could see to make even a modest living was by writing. And on the few occasions when writing brought him a little money, his reaction was that of the country boy--he either felt guilty or a fool.¹² The aversion to the acquisitive motive, which all his fictional converts to city life develop, mellows in Anderson into the motive of belonging to the world of American country gentry and the First Families of Virginia. Anderson built an expensive and impressive country home, placed figures of Chinese aristocrats on his desk, and put away the silk scarves and socks once admired by the Negroes of New Orleans.¹³ The ironic part of the Marion episode, of course, is that Anderson was not becoming someone at all. In fact, at that time, as a later chapter will show, Anderson's literary reputation was declining, his creative powers were leaving him, and his personal situation was anything but happy.

The instability of his personal life was a constant source of uneasiness to Anderson. He seemed always to be in the process of beginning or ending a marriage, of changing his address or his publisher. To make matters

¹²Notebook, p. 66.

¹³Ibid., p. 65.

worse he gave himself more than his share of blame in the misfortunes of those close to him (the death of Tennessee Mitchell, his second wife, and of Earl, his youngest brother, for example). Things never really went right for Anderson after 1912, when he deserted his family and shortly afterwards his job as owner of a paint factory. It may have been that what was at first an effect of the search became a reason for continuing it. It may have been, that is, that his initial renunciation of the family for the search became less painful than the social stigma that marked him after the second and third renunciations. The only way he could see to remove the stigma was to plead the high purpose of the search and to continue with it. Like many another apostle of individualism, Anderson was never a man to live on an island. He was an intensely social being and must have felt the pain and exasperation his matrimonial bungling caused his wives and friends even if he did not acknowledge it. The strength of his defense lay in his ability to convince himself and others that his mission as an artist was the supremely sacrificial act in his own life and that it justified involving the lives of those near him.

Let us now follow Anderson's search for salvation through his major works, beginning with Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ONE AND THE MANY

"Something is wrong with American life and we Americans do not want to look at it."¹

When Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men appeared, one or two friends of Anderson's attempted to discern a new star in the literary heavens.² There were even murmurings about Anderson's being an American Dostoevsky; but these were hushed by his bewildered confession that the only similarity he saw between the Russians and himself was that they had all been raised on cabbage soup. Except by the devoted student of American fiction, Anderson's first two books are largely ignored today. This is

¹Sherwood Anderson, Marching Men (New York: John Lane Company, 1917), p. 100.

²Ben Hecht wrote: "A new writer has risen to sing the Iliad of America, a fellow full of rugged poetry and great reticence. . . . His first book is . . . the rolling of drums. In its pages lies the promise of a new human comedy and a new, fresh, clean and virile spirit in American literature." (Quoted: Schevill, op. cit., p. 74). Floyd Dell wrote: "I felt myself in the presence of a powerful mind, with a magnificent grip on reality . . . a mind full of beautiful, intense, and perilous emotion. . . . The thing which captures me and will not let me go is the profound sincerity, the note of serious, baffled, tragic questioning which I hear above its laughter and tears." (Quoted in N. Bryllion Fagin, The Phenomenon of Sherwood Anderson (Baltimore: The Rossi-Bryn Company, 1927), p. 457).

partly because the books are failures per se, but partly, too, because they are said to have virtually nothing in common with what Anderson is remembered for. The contemporary critical temper usually dismisses them in one terse, disparaging paragraph.

And yet both Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men are as much Anderson as anything he ever wrote. Sam McPherson and Beaut McGregor are as unmistakably Andersorian heroes as are George Willard (Winesburg, Ohio), Hugh McVey (Poor White), John Webster (Many Marriages), and Bruce Dudley (Dark Laughter). The theme of the two books, which may be broadly defined as the growing collectivism of industrial life, is also as much Anderson as is the isolation-frustration-neurosis theme of Winesburg, Ohio or the primitivism of Dark Laughter. In fact, Anderson's later works are logical developments of the theme of his first two.

II

Sam McPherson, "a tall big-boned boy of thirteen"³ as the book opens, is the son of Windy McPherson, a Civil War-touched Don Quixote incapable of knowing where reality ends and fiction begins. Windy "chafed under the fact of his present obscure position in life." Had he been able to carry even "the night stick of the town

³Sherwood Anderson, Windy McPherson's Son (Revised Edition; New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1922), p. 9. This title will be abbreviated hereafter to WMS.

marshal life might have retained something of its sweetness, but to have ended by becoming an obscure housepainter in a village that lived by raising corn and by feeding that corn to red steers--ugh!--the thought made him shudder." It was humiliating, to say the least, and "to forget his humiliation . . . he fell to loud boasting and to the nursing of a belief within himself that in truth not Lincoln nor Grant but he himself had thrown the winning die in the great struggle."⁴ "He cannot write novels, but he lives and enacts them," is M. Michaud's comment.⁵ Thus, Windy forgot his humiliation while the villagers of Caxton, Iowa, were amused by what Harry Hartwick calls his "senile braggardocio."⁶ The forgotten humiliation, though, had merely found a new resting place--in Windy's son, Sam--where it finally burgeoned into attempted patricide.

As a result of his natural acumen and a desire to make up for his loss of standing through Windy in Caxton society, Sam becomes the shrewdest of newspaper boys and a "bright young lad" according to the drug-store philosophers

⁴Ibid., p. 18.

⁵Régis Michaud, The American Novel Today (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1928), p. 156.

⁶Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction (New York: The American Book Company, 1934), p. 118.

headed by John Telfer, a self-styled "flinger of idle words into the air of a village intent upon raising corn."⁷ Telfer promises Sam that he will "Be one of the big men of the world," if he follows the former's advice to "Make money! Cheat! Lie! . . . Get your name up for a modern, high-class American."⁸ There being little chance of doing this in Caxton, Iowa, Sam sells his paper round with his peanut and popcorn business for the smart sum of three hundred and fifty dollars, collects his seven hundred dollar bank balance, and sets off for Chicago.

In Chicago he climbs rapidly to the top of the success-heap, once again through natural acumen and his deftness in removing other climbers by a foot placed where it will do the most good. Like all of Anderson's later heroes he is sickened by contemporary religion and puzzled by sex. One experience of each is considered sufficient by Anderson to justify these attitudes.

Sam manages to take control of the Rainey Arms Company, which he turns into an American equivalent of Krupp, by dint of his own unmoral, hard-boiled business head, his employer's fatuousness, and his marriage to the boss' daughter. "I want something solid. I like solid things. I want you."⁹ Sue Rainey slows him down somewhat, as

⁷WMS, p. 71.

⁸Ibid., p. 75.

⁹Ibid., p. 186.

women always slow down Anderson's men. Destroying Sam's old gods of position, power, and material gain with surprising ease, Sue convinces him that "service to mankind through children"¹⁰ is the most worthwhile dedication of two lives such as theirs. After two dangerous and unsuccessful pregnancies, however, the purposeful Sue suffers a spiritual relapse for two years. Perhaps civilization has made her unfit for childbearing, but the symbolic truth is that Sam has taken her as a mother, not as a wife. This is revealed by the remark Sam makes to the nurse as Sue lies in labor: "My mother is dead. . . . I wish that you, like Mary Underwood, would be a new mother to me."¹¹ Sue then decides that her life will henceforth be "dedicated" to social welfare work. She brings home a nightly assortment of grubby fanatics, shouting anarchists, self-styled saints and self-saved sinners.

This is too much for Sam who redirects his energies back into the arms company, negotiates a merger that places him in control of all the firearms companies in America, and becomes a "captain of industry," "a giant of finance," After his final break with Sue, as the result of his unscrupulous treatment of her father's interests during the merger, he becomes the familiar figure of the American

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 188

¹¹ Ibid., p. 213.

tycoon. His income pours in from spectacular deals in oil, mining, coal, railroads, and so on. He had

running horses at the tracks, memberships in many clubs, a country house in Wisconsin, and shooting preserves in Texas. He drank steadily, played poker for high stakes, kept in the public prints and day after day led his crew upon the high seas of finance. He did not dare to think and in his heart he was sick of it, sick to the soul, so that when thought came to him he got out of his bed to seek roistering companions.¹²

Success in the city proving as unsatisfying as obscurity in the village, Sam quits Chicago with no more ceremony than he had Caxton, and goes off, as did Ulysses, Galahad and Christian, to "spend his life seeking truth," to look for new gods. "In his mind was no definite idea of where he was going or what he was going to do. He knew only that he would follow the message his hand had written. He would try to spend his life seeking truth."¹³ Of course, his pilgrimage is intrinsically religious, in spite of, or because of, his "Go on and do what you dare. . . . I will not follow you now. I shall never try to find you after this,"¹⁴ when he believes Sue to have died in childbirth. Thus, "an American multi-millionaire, a man in the midst of money-making, one who had realised the American dream, [had] sickened at the feast, and . . . wandered out

¹²Ibid., p. 250.

¹³Ibid., p. 255.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 217.

of a fashionable club with a bag in his hand and a roll of bills in his pocket . . . to come on this strange quest--to seek Truth, to seek God."¹⁵ Like the Bruce Dudley of Dark Laughter, a novel written some thirteen years later, Sam retreats to the village, to his original environment. He tries to find Truth in craftsmanship by becoming a carpenter. Truth is not there, so he tries to outsmart some of his former Chicago associates who are developing for their private monopoly the water power of his adopted Illinois town. This fails when his identity is discovered, as do his efforts to help some striking working girls. The Truth is not in philanthropy or socialism, then. Sam seems to intuit enough about the Truth to give the impression, in each of his post-cathartic acts, of doing penance for sins committed against the Truth, but perhaps he is too concerned with his conclusions as to what Truth is not to understand what it is, if it is.

Rather like a premature child of the Lost Generation, Sam "tries to forget" by spending a few years hunting big game, living high in Paris, London and New York, and indulging himself in increasingly "prolonged comas of inebriacy,"¹⁶ to quote Hartwick. "Thus ends Book III. Thus ends Sam's

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 258.

¹⁶ Hartwick, op. cit., p. 119.

quest. Thus should have ended Anderson's first novel,"¹⁷ is Fagin's comment, easily sympathized with, at this point.

One day while drunk, Sam goes home with a woman; and the moral stupor of years is replaced by compassion when the miserably sordid circumstances of his demi-mondaine's children evoke in him the ghosts of his own childhood. The woman is happy for him to clothe and adopt the children, whom he brings to Sue, still waiting and still with "the mother hunger."¹⁸

Perhaps from the beginning Anderson had the very serious intention of showing the American dream for what it really is, but as he began to write of Sam's rise to success, the fictional hero became for the author a symbolic fulfillment of his own dreams and so he escaped from his creator's control. However, the confusion is not only of intention, but ideology. Why, for instance, does Sam go mystically seeking truth amongst the humble when he is convinced that materialism, the evil the truth must conquer, can be fought by the few remaining honest businessmen "who one dreams have had an awakening."¹⁹ This confusion extends to the execution of the novel, being responsible for the mixture of melodrama and realism, of narration

¹⁷Fagin, op. cit., p. 29.

¹⁸WMS, p. 345.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 139.

and exposition, of structural looseness and clumsy language.

Paradoxically, it is Anderson's intellectual and moral seriousness that is responsible for the confusion in Windy McPherson's Son. Anderson cannot reconcile two impulses: one, the fictional impulse, to tell stories about people, about the strange things that happened to one's next door neighbor; and, two, the expository, didactic impulse, to write a social treatise on life in these United States. After the advent of Sam in Chicago the second impulse increasingly predominates, and at the end one finds the intellectual and moral seriousness getting in the way of the story. He seizes upon the idea that "Man wants children--not his own children--any children,"²⁰ as if that were the end of the search, but is forced by his own integrity to counter the reader's impression by saying Sam felt "an almost overpowering desire to turn and run away from the house, from Sue . . . from the three new lives." And, in the last sentence, "trying to push aside some dark blinding mass, he moved out of the grove and /stumbled/ up the steps and into the house."²¹

If Régis Michaud is correct in his judgment that in Windy McPherson's Son, "the unpardonable sin, according to

²⁰Ibid., p. 297.

²¹Ibid., p. 349.

the novelist, is automatism, petrification on the surface, routine," that Anderson "insists on an incessant renewal of life, on change and migration as the essential condition of moral progress,"²² then Anderson is inexplicably trying to cut clear across a fundamental postulate of his book. If renewal, change and migration are of the essence, final Truth (and by Truth Anderson meant something he could live with permanently) was impossible. And this was precisely his own spiritual dilemma: how could he, in conscience, "discover" Truth when his continuation of the search signified it was still hidden. It is not as if there were many truths to be found; Anderson is looking for the unique truth or the unique set of truths about living which were lost with pre-industrial America. Rarely explicit, Anderson's total output amounts to a most explicit statement of this.

If M. Michaud is correct in his further judgment that Windy McPherson's Son "discusses a case of the dissociation and reunification of the self, a problem which was soon to become an obsession with the author,"²³ then the equivocal ending may be explained by Sam's (and Anderson's) uncertainty that the search for reunification is complete. Had the Truth lain pragmatically in the Care of Children and

²² Michaud, op. cit., p. 168.

²³ Ibid., p. 169.

theoretically in the virtues of Love and Pity, Anderson would have needed to write no more confessionals. In a sense the existence of the subsequent novels excludes the possibility of resolution for the first.

According to M. Michaud, the thematic opposition in the last sections of the book reflects a conflict between Anderson's socialistic and mystic impulses. Mysticism is dominant in the large success-story section, socialism in the defense-of-the-proletariat sections, and mysticism again in the last or good-Samaritan section.

The sad idyll of Sam and Mary Underwood, the gloomy atmosphere and the semi-consciousness through which the protagonists of this book move and seek themselves, foreshadow his novels of a later date. . . . Then suddenly . . . he drops everything to become a socialist. Up to this point the story reads very much like a book by Upton Sinclair. But Anderson is more of a mystic than a socialist. He does not much trust the proletariat helping moral progress. Sam is converted. He redeems himself not by following the path of social justice but that of Love and Pity.²⁴

With the exception of the few incidents centering around Windy, the nearest Anderson comes to giving the reader a feeling for the state of mind of his characters is through his use of nature description--usually wind, lightning or rain is used to suggest his characters' moods. The effectiveness of this is quite limited because it is such a very obvious device, a stop which the author pulls

²⁴Loc. cit.

out every time he wishes to give a sense of the violence of a character's emotions. Sometimes Anderson would do better to come right out and say what he means. The book is a revolt against Victorian reticence, but, on the side of language, at least, the revolt is not very marked. In practically all of his references to sex Anderson euphemizes. Sam experiences "a hot wave of desire,"²⁵ he feels "the insistent call of the flesh,"²⁶ and is "seized and shook" by "animal desire."²⁷

What ultimately makes the book so ludicrous a performance is the gap between the author's mystic vision and his articulation. In the second novel, Marching Men, one finds that because of the increase in the mystic element, the gap becomes more marked.

III

Having contracted to publish two more books for Anderson, John Lane brought out Marching Men in 1917. To the casual reader the book is as distressingly bad as Windy McPherson's Son. To the discerning reader it often seems a little worse. Doubtless its similarity to Anderson's first novel has done little to help its reputation. Both books were products of Anderson's early imitative period, being written before

²⁵WMS, p. 138.

²⁶Ibid., p. 145.

²⁷Ibid., p. 198.

1912 in Elyria, Ohio; it may be that Marching Men, though published later, was written before or during the composition of Windy McPherson's Son.

They can both be loosely defined as sociological novels, the second being more definitely class-conscious than the first. "Something is wrong with American life," says Anderson, "and we Americans do not want to look at it."²⁸ The search for salvation and truth in ideals continues more on a group and less on a personal level than before. The plot line in both books is almost identical until the final sections and almost every character in one has an equivalent in the other. "Anderson," says Harry Hansen, "has reintroduced his favorite triangle--the hero with his dreams and his desire to change his environment, coming into close relationship with a talented, high-spirited, aristocratic girl and being pitted against her father, who always represents the materialistic class."²⁹ The mystic, demonic overtones of sex, power, and personality reappear with slightly more emphasis in the second novel. The same confusions of idea and method are found in both. The dénouements are handled with the same lack of conviction.

²⁸Marching Men, p. 100.

²⁹Harry Hansen, Midwest Portraits (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), p. 146.

Probably no stranger book has ever been dedicated "To American Workingmen." Its message to the laborer is both visionary and realistic; its faith in him is countered by scepticism. To Percy Boynton the book seems "like a compound of Rousseau and Zola, in which Rousseau did him [Anderson] no great service."³⁰ Beaut McGregor is Jesus Christ and John L. Lewis, Joseph Smith and Brigham Young; more Christ than Lewis, more Smith than Young. At times he recalls Walter Mitty, at others the fusion in his character of the fanaticism and mysticism of the prophet and the shrewdness and practicality of the born organizer suggests an Adolph Hitler. And the movement of the Marching Men has certain parallels with Nazism, a relationship that would occur to any contemporary reader, and did occur, as a matter of fact, to Anderson himself. "It was Hitler who eventually worked out what was in my mind."³¹ What was in his mind was also there in Windy McPherson's Son, where he writes of the turn-of-the-century robber barons:

They were, many of them, not of the brute trader type, but were, instead, men who acted quickly and with a daring and audacity impossible to the average mind. They wanted power and were, many of them, entirely unscrupulous, but for the most part they were men with a fire burning within them, men who

³⁰Percy H. Boynton, America in Contemporary Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 123.

³¹Quoted in Schevill, op. cit., p. 76.

became what they were because the world offered them no better outlet for their vast energies.³²

Irving Howe sees a relationship between the Marching Men movement and Populism. He suggests that to this late nineteenth-century "democratic uprising of the people against the trusts and railroads," can be traced "the blend of leadership and impatience with ideas," the "authoritarian tendency buried deep within a certain kind of plebeian revolt," the "insistently programmatic mindlessness," the scorn of the "parvenu messiah" for the "city slickers and intellectual 'long-hairs' who 'jawed' about ideas when immediate action was needed,"³³ all of which are undeniably present in Marching Men.

Beaut McGregor's childhood is not very different to Sam McPherson's. The locale, Coal Creek, Pennsylvania, is a little more industrialized and therefore more remote from the Golden Age than Caxton, Iowa; the poverty and the boy's hatred of his situation are magnified; the family is reduced by two; and the father is a differently conceived character. Beaut's father becomes "cracked" when a wooden beam falls on him in the coal mine where he works. Cracked McGregor's face and shoulder are twisted as well as his mind. "They thought him cracked but he knew more than they,"³⁴

³²WMS, pp. 232-233.

³³Howe, op. cit., pp. 87-88.

³⁴Marching Men, p. 41.

since he is the literary type of the wise fool. Anderson has made his perfervid scheming to start a farm, to work above the ground in the sun, a misunderstood warning to industrializing America and a futile attempt on McGregor's part to return to the pre-industrial way of life. McGregor has lost his mind digging for coal to feed the maw of industry but at the same time has fortuitously gained an insight, called madness because it is unacceptable, into the crisis of his fellowmen. They are blackening not only their faces but their souls. It is inevitable, then, that McGregor should perish in a lone attempt to rescue some miners trapped by fire in a shaft of the mine. He reaches the door of the place of torment but his resistance to the infernal heat gives out and he is consumed.

His son, Beaut, is the only one who understands Cracked McGregor and it is thus not surprising that he should inherit some of his father's eccentricities. He, too, is plebeian man filled with demonic energy, mystical vision, and clairvoyant prophecy in his angry attempt to wrest back man's individuality, his God-given nobility, from the industrial Mammon. Beaut is an early "angry young man" as Sam McPherson was an early member of "the lost generation." He is incensed at the way "men, coming out of Europe and given millions of square miles of black fertile land, mines and forests, have failed in the challenge given them by fate and have produced out of the stately order of nature only

the sordid disorder of man."³⁵ People merely think he is crazy, of course, but his outward behavior--knocking "disorderly" old men into the gutter, tirading in public to himself or an audience--offers few other alternatives.

At the age of seventeen Beaut uproots himself from Coal Creek to make the inevitable assault upon and triumph over Chicago. Like Sam McPherson, he prowls the Chicago streets thinking "of all men as counters in some vast game at which presently he was to be master player."³⁶ There are many apostrophes to Chicago in the book. I quote one which combines the phrases of a socialist manifesto with the first notes of Anderson's cornfield mysticism.

Chicago is one vast gulf of disorder. Here is the passion for gain, the very spirit of the bourgeoisie [sic] gone drunk with desire. The result is something terrible. Chicago is leaderless, purposeless, slovenly, down at the heels.

And back of Chicago lie the long corn fields that are not disorderly. There is hope in the corn. Spring comes and the corn is green. It shoots up out of the black land and stands up in orderly rows. The corn grows and thinks of nothing but growth. Fruition comes to the corn and it is cut down and disappears. Barns are filled to bursting with the yellow fruit of the corn.

And Chicago has forgotten the lesson of the corn. All men have forgotten. It has never been told to the young men who come out of the corn fields to live in the city.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

³⁶ WMS, p. 77.

³⁷ Marching Men, p. 156.

More idealistic than Sam, Beaut hates his fellowmen because in the disorder of their lives and their regimentation by industry they seem to reflect his failure to help them. On the other hand he has not the astuteness of Sam who realizes that "the public mind was a thing too big, too complicated and inert for a vision or an ideal to get at and move deeply."³⁸ Until a pale, female friend (who has replaced the undertaker of Coal Creek's tubercular daughter) donates her life's savings to Beaut's education, he works in an apple-packing factory where his strength, ugliness, ruthless opportunism, but mostly his ability, cause even the boss to look to his job. The latter's discomfort may have been due in part to Beaut's dislike for the German foreman resulting immediately in the foreman's missing death through strangulation by seconds. With Edith Carson's money Beaut becomes a labor lawyer, as a means to his end of labor reform, and soon wins national recognition for gaining the acquittal (in a court-room drama, which seems straight out of soap opera to contemporary tastes) of a plebeian client framed in a murder trial by First Ward politicians. "That's what I'm going to fight," growls McGregor; "the comfortable, well-to-do acceptance of a disorderly world, the smug men who see nothing wrong with

³⁸WMS, p. 279.

a world like this."³⁹

At this time, however, his Marching Men idea is beginning to sweep "over the country like a religious revival."⁴⁰ The seeds of this idea he has been desperately and unsuccessfully scattering in the minds of the astonished Chicago workers since the moment of truth at his mother's funeral when the mourners seemed ennobled and transfigured as they respectfully fell into step behind his mother's coffin.⁴¹ As the movement gets under way, passersby witness the curious sight of factory hands in vacant lots marching with a new sense of community and of self-realization. At this point in the utterly humorless narrative comes its most unintentionally funny passage. Of Sam's methods of propagating the Marching Men movement Anderson writes: "He had watched Dr. Dowie and Mrs. Eddy. He knew what he was doing."⁴²

Where all this is going lead neither the reader nor the author has any idea. So Anderson wisely postpones the issue by introducing another theme--a love affair.

³⁹Marching Men, p. 164.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 283.

⁴¹Fagin lavishes indiscriminate praise on this passage, calling it "a great picture; a clarifying moment; a lightning flash; a moment that makes literature memorable," then comparing it to several such moments by illustrious novelists. See Fagin, op. cit., p. 33.

⁴²Marching Men, p. 284.

But the girl makes the mistake of showing her colors too soon:

"I want all of life," she cried; "I want the lust and the strength and the evil of it. I want to be one of the new women, the saviors of our sex."⁴³

Without being appalled, Beaut (unlike Sam) refuses to be turned from his vision by "that more definite and lovely vision,"⁴⁴ the Andersonian (and Lawrencian) female of prey who will attempt to suck from him his spiritual vitality and "to express through him a secret desire for power."⁴⁵ Beaut retreats to timid Edith, the pale and passionless milliner.

Back now to the Marching Men who eventually just march right out of the novel. There is no outcome, no resolution, for Anderson has seen before the novel is two thirds over that marching will not be the workers' salvation. Thus he can do no more than intimate that out of the movement, out of universal participation and brotherhood, will one day come the miracle of intellectual community. Never an impressively strong vessel, the book is leaking away its sociology and its philosophy through every line at the end. With forty pages to go, Anderson drops the narrative to shift the point of view to someone called "I" who is writing

⁴³Ibid., pp. 200-201.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 221.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 231.

after several years have erased the memory of what the final upshot of the Marching Men movement was. He has evaded a conclusion by the not-very-agile trick of jumping right over it.

It is not difficult to see what Anderson is driving at in his Marching Men movement. He is at once arraigning the society and civilization of his time and dramatizing the new state of mind of its people. He sees as elements in the national chaos and individual disorganization brought about by growing industrial collectivism: spiritual and intellectual isolation; deprivation by machinery and materialistic individualism of self-expression through crafts; man's sense of uselessness, incompetence and inconsequence inflicted by the superior productivity of machinery; industrial collectivism's deterring of independent realization of the self; and the vanishing of idealism, beauty and adventure from life.

With these thoughts gathering in intensity during his Elyria days, Anderson found himself one day on the platform of an elevated railroad in Chicago, watching passengers stream out of a train. Their disordered, heterogeneous progress resembling that of a mutually indifferent herd of cattle, Anderson began to muse on how different it would be were they to march from the train. The flicker of speculation rapidly kindled into the light of revelation; everything jelled, as it were, with Marching emerging as the

panacea for the masses. Whether the vision came at a time in his career corresponding to that of McGregor's similar experience⁴⁶ it would be interesting to know. Certainly it came after his Ohio National Guard and Spanish-American War experiences, and one may speculate (Anderson says nothing of the matter) as to how much these experiences influenced the conception and execution of Marching Men and to what extent the vision was preconceived before the Chicago incident.⁴⁷

By marching side by side, then, men were to overcome their isolation, to express themselves through a disciplined communal gesture, to feel the self-fulfillment of being an integral unit in something of untested potential, and to do, for once, something they earnestly wanted to do. It was to be a gesture of assertion by man of himself. But, since McGregor was no Hitler it could only remain a gesture. The vagueness of the whole scheme is brought out in Beaut's attempts to define what his proposal will mean to the working men of America. If a man march shoulder to shoulder with

⁴⁶Marching Men, p. 235.

⁴⁷That the connection between his military experience and the Marching Men movement was established in Anderson's mind is shown towards the end of Marching Men: "There were leaders enough! The Cuban War and the State Militia had taught too many men the swing of the march step for there not to be at least two or three competent drill masters in every little company of men."

his fellows,

he will know then that he is a part of something real and he will catch the rhythm of the mass and glory in the fact that he is a part of the mass and that the mass has meaning. He will begin to feel great and powerful. Out of this physical communion there might arise a greater voice, something to make the very seas to tremble.⁴⁸

Anderson's oft-noted paucity of expression and vocabulary (his must be almost the smallest in American literature) lets him down rather badly here. Thus, it is impossible for him to achieve any greater specificity than is contained in expressions such as "part of something real," "the mass has meaning," or, "to feel great and powerful." His obvious technique is to attempt to disguise this shortcoming by seeing if what he means cannot be better said figuratively. However, the type of poetizing revealed in the last sentence of the quotation falls rather short of the mystic and demonic it is plainly meant to suggest. In fact it just falls flat. And if McGregor tells the marchers: "When you have marched till you are one giant body then will happen a miracle. A brain will grow in the giant you have made,"⁴⁹ the obvious answer is still the one Oscar Cargill has made: "It would probably be better

⁴⁸ Marching Men, p. 278.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 297.

if the brain grew first and they marched to some purpose afterwards."⁵⁰ Anderson possibly comes closer to gaining stature for his notion when he makes a bold attempt to give it cosmic significance:

Day and night he dreamed of the actual physical phenomena of the men of labor marching their way into power and of the thunder of a million feet rocking the world and driving the great song of order purpose and discipline into the soul of Americans. . . . "They will see the seasons and the planets marching through space but they will not march."⁵¹

The number of such passages throughout the book leads one to suspect that the cosmic frame of reference as a symbolic and allegorical background for fiction was formulating itself as an idea in Anderson's mind at this early stage of his career. Why Anderson did not return to it more often and emphatically is part of the larger poser of why he was never able to return with the same success to the Winesburg style. What he lacked in Marching Men, of course, was symbolism. In Winesburg, Ohio there is the protagonist (as has been indicated above) of the small town, the backdrop of the surrounding countryside, and the characters to interact with and before these two. Small town, countryside, and characters are, though Midwestern, identifiable

⁵⁰ Oscar Cargill, Intellectual America: Ideas on the March (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941), p. 106.

⁵¹ Marching Men, p. 178.

in their essence with community life and with life everywhere. There is nothing of this in Marching Men. Anderson either did not want to push consistently the cosmic significance of his movement (though why he should not is hard to understand) or else he did not then realize that wherever the cosmic frame is used it must be created symbolically. Thus in Moby Dick there is the sea, the whale, the ship, and the men, all or most of which are present in each chapter. It is the prairie in Cooper's The Prairie, and the sea in Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. In Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter there is the one appearance of the letter A in the sky which is sufficient to give cosmic overtones to the rest of the book. In art, the same condition applies, as one can see by looking at Poussin's Metamorphosis of the Plants. Here the figures from the world of Greek legend are caught in the attitude or act of universal human experience which they have always symbolized. At the same time, however, the double vision of Poussin has placed them in a dancing circle under the eye of purple Pan and golden Apollo. So they are individual and choric performers in a dance of life set amidst symbolic reminders of its cosmic significance. It is unfair to place Anderson alongside Poussin, of course, except insofar as Poussin's work is the apotheosis of the technique in which Anderson was a fumbling novice.

Like Beaut McGregor, Anderson is "trapped in his mystical vision," and whereas Beaut "can only resort to violence to hold his marching men together,"⁵² Anderson is left meaninglessly beating the air with this sort of thing: "There are things that animals know that have not been understood by men," he cried. "Consider the bees. Have you thought that man has not tried to **work** out a collective intellect? Why should man not try to work that out?"⁵³ In a sense, Anderson has only himself to blame for this, since an anti-intellectualist corollary to his nature-worship or primitivism appears in Marching Men. The idea is that man's ability to use words has drawn him away from the centers of life. What Anderson has in mind is the socialists' methods and the futility of words divorced from action in battling against twentieth-century social evils to which intelligent and sympathetic people could not but be sensitive.

On and on through life we go, socialists, dreamers, makers of laws, sellers of goods and believers in suffrage for women and we continuously say words, worn-out words, crooked words, words without power or pregnancy in them.⁵⁴

Allied to an intrinsic poverty of expression, then, there

⁵²Schevill, op. cit., p. 76.

⁵³Marching Men, p. 261.

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 123.

is in Marching Men a suspicion (which Anderson later confirms) of the ultimate uselessness and even deceitfulness inherent in consciously wrought language. Sometimes he confused Art with precision or beauty of expression and it may be that his confusion has something to do with the absence of such expression in Marching Men and its presence in Anderson's more radically experimental or "arty" works such as Many Marriages (1923), Dark Laughter (1925), and his two volumes of poetry.

One feels that a stiff reading course in Thoreau would have done a lot for Anderson. Thoreau is also a mystic, a nature-worshipper, a hater of commerce and industrialization (and, incidentally, another of those cosmic writers in his symbolic use of Walden Pond), but his precision and beauty of expression makes clear by contrast the gap there is between emotion or idea and articulation in Anderson. To be sure, Anderson's sociology is much more engagé, more potent, than was Thoreau's, but on the other hand sweet spring water is much easier drinking on the long pull than raw whisky.

Nowadays, auctorial comment or intrusion is unfashionable in the novel. Without going into the aesthetic pros and cons of this, one can notice, nevertheless, that Marching Men has a good deal of auctorial comment. It is characteristically found at the beginning of chapters (in a manner

structurally reminiscent of the Fielding school of novelists), though it often interrupts narrative and scenic portions within a chapter. Anderson thus makes an already quite obvious thesis into one plainly ridden too hard, and, in so doing, reduces his fiction to mere illustration or ornament for his argument. On the other hand, so much of the book is summary narrative or sketchy scenes that it seems hardly more than a film scenario. This weakness and the sentimental melodrama of the story make one wonder, as Cleveland Chase did of Windy McPherson's Son, why "the usually alert movie magnates passed this up."⁵⁵ In both novels we have a series of unclimactically arranged episodes of different sizes, chosen with no observable regard for total effects. If an episode seems interesting, as an illustration for one of his preoccupations, or merely as an episode, Anderson includes it.

Throughout more than nine tenths of the novel he attempts to build up for the reader and himself a faith in the "rightness" of McGregor's mystic search for communion with and for the workers. Then in the last twenty-four pages he presents an unironical counter to the vision and ends on a question mark. One suspects that Anderson intended having the workers march to success, but, as in his first novel, he was forced at the last minute to preserve

⁵⁵Cleveland Chase, Sherwood Anderson (New York; Robert M. McBride and Company, 1927), p. 22.

his intellectual integrity, to admit to his own uncertainty by writing Book VII.

Marching Men is really a kind of spiritual autobiography, a very personal book, a rather pathetic, embarrassing and certainly naïve attempt to create a substitute religion, a myth in which to believe. The myth which he created by the very act of writing the novel is unable to hold his faith even to the end of the act, and the rational self must assert itself in the final scenes. Marching as a solution to the problem of salvation was no solution but merely an evasion of intellectual responsibility. This is why the theme of the book never reappeared, why Anderson wished the book forgotten and why he could only look back on it with a mixture of awe and dread.

In his attempt to create a myth in Marching Men, Anderson draws on the Gospels. That the "brotherhood of man" is more than an organization of workers, is something akin to a return to an Old Testament kind of community is revealed in phrases like "rebirth of the world," "birth of such a god," and "the old religious exaltation."⁵⁶ The prose Anderson uses owes the usual debt to the Bible, his favorite prose work. Like Christ, Beut is virginal, "as virginal and pure as a chunk of the hard black coal out of the hills of his own state and like the coal ready to burn itself out

⁵⁶Marching Men, pp. 275, 276, 276.

into power,"⁵⁷ and even though he marries off-stage late in the book, he does not choose the object of desire, Margaret, but Edith, who is, as far as the reader is concerned, sexless, a humble believer in the divinity of her husband, a cooler of fevered brows, a washer of tired feet. "The half-mythical figure of Mary, the lover of Jesus, came into her mind and she aspired to be such another."⁵⁸ When Christ came into Galilee, preaching the gospel and performing miracles, people began questioning among themselves, saying, "What thing is this?" When McGregor begins to organize his laborers by preaching to them his gospel of marching the purposelessness out of life, "Everywhere men began to see and hear of the marchers. From lip to lip ran the question, 'What's going on?'"⁵⁹

And, as the novel progresses, Anderson reveals that, contrary to his genetic intention, he is not really concerned with an organization of workers who would be capable

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 122.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 302. According to Hans Poppe, Edith Carson, Mary Underwood (of Windy McPherson's Son), "and all the other small people putting up a brave front to the world can be traced back to the influence of Anderson's mother. The tenderness, the loneliness, and the silence of his mother aroused [his] sympathy for other lonely, suffering people." (Poppe, op. cit., p. 64).

⁵⁹Marching Men, p. 280.

as a cohesive unit of demanding their economic rights from the employer-capitalists; the Marching is a way to Communion, to the Brotherhood of Man. It is an escape from the present madness for individual expression into the old love of man for his fellows. It is a primitively Christian Way-of-Life, something to replace the Rotarian Christianity which, in our times, is devoid of spiritual efficacy. It is not the Marching Men which the "I" remembers so vividly, but the "religious exaltation," the time when man was seized, had his heart battered, was ravished by faith in something greater than the hoeing of radishes. It is thus that Anderson expresses a yearning for "the right place and the right people," in more primitive days before the advent of rationalism and science, days when gods and angels were ten feet high and as real as silver dollars.

IV

Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men represent the first stage of Anderson's search for spiritual salvation. Unlike their more sophisticated successors, Sam McPherson and Beaut McGregor loudly proclaim they are seeking Truth. The fact that before their decisions to seek Truth the two had used duplicity and corruption in pushing their way to power does not disqualify them as truth-seekers. On the contrary, because of their awakening (the turning point in all of Anderson's novels and in his own life) to the sins of their past, they are especially qualified. The truth

manifested by McPherson's epiphany is that individual salvation lies in the rearing of children, while McGregor is convinced that brotherhood through mass marching is the key to national salvation. These solutions are rather far from the Truth, or any truth for that matter, and at the conclusion of both books one finds evidence that their author reluctantly shares this view.

He shares this view because he senses that Sam and Beaut are circling back to the place they came from. In leaving lives of poverty, humiliation, and ignorance in the American village of the late nineteenth century for life in the rapidly industrializing towns, each is rejecting his pre-industrial heritage in order to get his "name up as a modern, high-class American."⁶⁰ When both find that the fulfillment of the American dream of success is a dehumanizing nightmare, they reject the industrial present to seek truth and salvation in an idealized vision of the way of life they have left. In their dedication to the pastoral virtues of child-rearing (with Sam) and brotherhood (with Beaut) they are not on the road to a new Utopia but one leading back to the American village. The salvation through regeneration and purification, which they are seeking in an agrarian, elemental, Old Testament kind of existence, goes hand in hand, they will realize, with the poverty,

⁶⁰WMS, p. 75.

the narrowness, the ignorance of the kind of existence from which they have fled. They are to learn the lesson which Anderson and all his heroes learn--that emancipation from one's origins leads only to renewed thralldom. This is the self-knowledge Anderson is groping towards in Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men; this is the real significance of the "dark blinding mass" that Sam cannot "push aside,"⁶¹ and of the "terrible illuminating instant" during Beaut's courtroom speech when men "saw themselves as they were."⁶²

⁶¹Ibid, p. 349.

⁶²Marching Men, p. 279.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE HOPE IN THE CORN

"There is hope in the corn. Spring comes and the corn is green. . . . The corn grows and thinks of nothing but growth. Fruition comes to the corn and it is cut down and disappears. And Chicago has forgotten the lesson of the corn."¹

Having failed to find any permanent salvation in either of the solutions offered in his first two novels, Anderson continued his search in Mid-American Chants, Winesburg, Ohio, and Poor White. The nature of the solutions in Windy McPherson's Son and Marching Men, however, determined the direction his next three books would take. After they have been utterly disillusioned by what Maxwell Geismar calls "the crushing and trampling of our competitive ethics,"² Sam McPherson and Beaut McGregor decide on the need for seeking truth and salvation. Their solution is a humanitarian dedication to reasserting the centrality of two life-principles--child-rearing and brotherhood--the pernicious neglect of which is the result of man's new allegiance to the machine. Though Anderson has doubts (engendered by the similarity between the initial and final positions of

¹Anderson, Marching Men, p. 156.

²Maxwell Geismar, "Sherwood Anderson: Last of the Towns-men," The Last of the Provincials: The American Novel, 1915-1925 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1947), p. 232.

both his heroes) as to the outcome of this dedication, he chooses to investigate further in his next three volumes the chances of salvation in a reassertion of "the old sweet things."³ Is there really any "hope in the corn," he asks.

II

It is not to "man wants children" or to "marching men" that Anderson's mystic seeking turns in Mid-American Chants, but to corn as an unsung symbol of nature, and to the cornfields associated with his youth. After being "long alone in a strange place where no gods came,"⁴ Anderson has discovered the gods to be not dead but alive and waiting in the corn. "Who," he asks in Poor White, "has written or sung of the beauties of cornfields in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa?"⁵ In his mind the cornfields are associated with the faith and the emotions of the pre-industrial age, the last years of which were Anderson's only years of belief. In those days, he writes in Poor White, "mankind seemed about to take time to try to understand itself. . . . A sense of quiet growth awoke in sleeping minds. It was the

³Anderson, Poor White, p. 149.

⁴Anderson, Mid-American Chants (Second Edition; New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1923), p. 45. Hereafter this title will be abbreviated to MAC.

⁵Poor White, p. 330.

time for art and beauty to awake in the land. . . . Instead the giant, Industry, awoke."⁶

For Anderson, the corn as a symbol of order, strength, virility, and virtue, becomes the Good; the Evil is that which destroys the old gods--industrialism. In Mid-American Chants Anderson is chanting down the aisles of corn and Chicago concrete the crisis of the American soul in his time. The chants are antiphonally divided, one might say, between the two themes of salvation and damnation, between the fulfillment, the community that man found in the past and the attrition of his soul he finds in the present.

It is customary with his critics to dismiss Anderson's poetry with some half dozen generalized comments about its lack of quality and its derivation from the Bible, Carl Sandburg, and, most of all, Walt Whitman. To this writer's knowledge, however, the actual similarities between Whitman and Anderson have never been carefully explored. It will be pertinent at this point to discuss the relationship of Anderson to Whitman in the light of the Emersonian concept of the poet (as set forth in Emerson's essay, "The Poet") which they both embodied.⁷

⁶Ibid., p. 132.

⁷The lives of the two men also had much in common. Both were of plebeian stock. Whitman's father was a builder, Anderson's a house-painter. Both families were large by

In their poetry both assigned a lofty role to the poet. He will "hurl [his] songs down the winds of the world,"⁸ Anderson says, as a god, a liberator, a prophet, an inspired medium, a divine literatus, a repository of race wisdom. "He is the world, and all the world has been asleep in him,"⁹ says Anderson. "He stands among partial men for the complete man"; he is "representative," and "apprises us not of his wealth, but of the common wealth,"¹⁰ says Emerson. For Emerson, the poet was to be the eye and tongue of the universal Over-Soul; the Namer, the Sayer, the Interpreter of man and nature; a man with the power (democratized, of course) of Carlyle's hero-prophet in literature.

Anderson and Whitman placed freedom in poetry (and in life) above everything. They resented established authority because it precluded a deep faith in something else. In

present-day standards, and neither Whitman nor Anderson received much schooling. Though both refused to be committed to earning a living in the usual way, both worked intermittently as newspaper men, both became professional editors. Both made significant journeys to New Orleans; Anderson made several. Both held unorthodox opinions for which their books (Whitman's Leaves of Grass, 1855, and Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, 1919) were condemned. Both held ambivalent attitudes toward democracy and the American Dream.

⁸ MAC, p. 19.

⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Emerson, Works (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), III, 5.

poetry, the freedom was of form, subject, and diction. Though Whitman could manage fine effects in seemingly formless poetry, Anderson nearly always revealed a gap between emotion and articulation as great (if not greater because of the more stringent formal requirements of poetry) as in his first two novels. Freedom in choice of subject matter was required because the poet, by virtue of his representative role, had to respond intensely to all the significant stimuli of life and write so that the resultant experience might be significantly shared with others. Whitman it was who had introduced and made lyrical the bio-chemical element. And Dreiser's "paeans to physiology"¹¹ (as M. Michaud calls them), which were inspired by Whitman's example, did the same thing for the novel. "Every touch should thrill,"¹² said Emerson of nature; and in Anderson's poetry his spiritual orgasms are almost indecent (more so than Whitman's "Children of Adam" poems) in their egotistic self-revelation. "I am not a priest but a lover, a new kind of lover,"¹³ he says in his "Song of Theodore," a self-exhibitionistic act that, unclothed as it is by form, produces little more than embarrassment. Anderson's subject matter is intended to

¹¹Michaud, op. cit., p. 154.

¹²Emerson, op. cit., p. 6.

¹³MAC, p. 25.

be as unrestricted and impartial as Whitman's was. This is not the impression one gains, though, because in the first place his volume is too short to be fairly representative and hence impartial, and then Anderson is so busy with those aspects of eroticism just beginning their bid for literary respectability, that he has no time even to suggest vast areas of experience that are both significant and respectable.

Whitman and Anderson were both primitivists. In his poetry Whitman insisted that the national faith in the common man ("simple, separate" and "En Masse")¹⁴ made of American democracy the new Eden. Religion, smothering under dogmatism and institutional bias, has taken to its bosom the gospel of democracy in Whitman and fled the church for the open air. Nature's religion, catholic in its doctrinal sympathy, was to be the final arbiter of the important issues, and Leaves of Grass its message. Whitman at one time considered calling his book "the new Bible" and often compared its structure to that of a cathedral;¹⁵ Anderson did call his second volume of poetry A New Testament. Anderson, however, is a little less wholesome in his motives than

¹⁴Walt Whitman, "One's Self I Sing," in Leaves of Grass, edited and with an introduction by Emory Holloway (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Limited, 1950), p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. vii, xiii.

Whitman. In the former, nature-worship takes the form of an orgiastic pantheism in which his fellow men, the corn, and the soil become one with his origins and being.¹⁶ Everything that lives is holy, he would have agreed with William Blake, and, like Emerson's poet, "it is nature the symbol, nature certifying the supernatural, body overflowed by life which he worships with coarse but sincere rites,"¹⁷ There is the same mystic union, transmutation, or metempsychosis with people and things in Whitman and Anderson. Anderson's best effort at this type of avatar is "The Song of Stephen the Westerner,"¹⁸ where the "I" is incarnated in each of a kaleidoscopic series of people, things, and states. There are a dozen or more of these poems in which the many-voiced singer, "I", takes up, Whitman-like, the burden--"Song of Industrial America," "Song of Cedric the Silent," "Song of the Beginning of Courage," even "Song of the Bug." Whitman is celebrating himself, America, and the coming of the New Adam. Writing over a half century later, Anderson's celebrating is transfused by lamentation over the failure of America and the failure of the New Adam (unless it were he) to appear.

Whitman evolved a mysticism of mutual incarnation in

¹⁶"I sang there--I dreamed there--I was suckled face downward in the black earth of my western cornland." (MAC, p. 69).

¹⁷Emerson, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁸MAC, pp. 38-40.

which Anderson, due to his pre-occupation with the idea of communion, became quite passionately involved. Out of the blend of the sensual with the mystical in both Whitman and Anderson come whispers of heavenly death together with what M. Michaud has called "the somber droning of the Erdgeist."¹⁹ The poet must utilize his demonic energy (given him by his abandonment to everything in nature) to write the inspired text of his experience. For, it is only, as Emerson says, by "unlocking, at all risks, his human doors, and suffering the ethereal tides to roll and circulate through him, [that] he is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals."²⁰

Anderson's whole career was an attempt to unlock doors, to submerge himself in this "great sea, this thing we call life,"²¹ as he put it. Although in later years he was to be stranded far from the sea of life, Winesburg, Ohio (published within months of Mid-American Chants) shows him "caught up into the life of the Universe" and speaking words that are "universally intelligible as the plants and animals."

¹⁹Michaud, op. cit., p. 154.

²⁰Emerson, op. cit., pp. 26-27.

²¹Letters, p. 119.

III

Having completed his contract to publish three Anderson manuscripts, John Lane rejected Winesburg, Ohio, a collection of short stories Anderson said he had written in Chicago during 1915 and 1916. One can hardly blame John Lane. Anderson's books had been anything but successful, and better works than Winesburg, Ohio still fail to get past the front desks of publishing houses. One can certainly sympathize with Lane, however, for booksales of Anderson's "favorite child"²² have always been in the best-seller class, after the two or three years it took the reading public to realize what it had been missing. Ben Huebsch, who in 1919 published what proved to be Anderson's best book, possibly realized it not only had the unbeatable selling potential of a succès de scandale but might well be a literary classic. In 1921, two years after the first edition, the Modern Library published a cut-rate edition with an introduction by Ernest Boyd. In 1949, seven of the stories appeared in a Viking Portable selection of Anderson's work, while a Signet paperback edition has been doing brisk business in the drugstores. Plans are now in hand to issue a superior paper-back edition. The book is a literary classic and has sold at least twice as well as

²²Memoirs, P. 352.

all his others put together.

Although the task of comprehensively summarizing all the literary criticism on Winesburg, Ohio is beyond the scope of the present study, typical statements of the four most common approaches to the work may be given. The approaches are the psychological, the socio-economic, the mythological, and the belletristic.

Psychologically, "the stories all have in common a study of the frustrations of seeking and not finding" by characters who are "lonely, warped by repressions . . . cut off from communion; vaguely they seek to break down the walls that surround themselves and secure some kind of interpenetration of personality and spirit,"²³ says Jarvis A. Thurston. "What Anderson is seeking to express in these stories," adds Cleveland Chase, "is the intricacy and subtlety that exists in the relationship of an individual to his physical environment and to other people."²⁴

From a socio-economic point of view, "the novelist ascribes the neurasthenia of his characters," M. Michaud believes, "their errantry and their inconsistency in thought and action to the shock of too sudden a transition from the old order to the new."²⁵ Alfred Kazin sees that one result

²³Thurston, op. cit., p. 92.

²⁴Chase, op. cit., p. 34.

²⁵Michaud, op. cit., p. 183.

of this transition was a writers' revolt against small-town life, and Winesburg, Ohio brought "new life into the American novel by dramatizing that emancipation in terms of common experience."²⁶

The myth of Winesburg, as N. Bryllion Fagin sees it, is in the delineation of

the rebellious spirit of man which leads its own life and dreams its own dreams, even in a dreamless age. In the rush of standardized materialism, in the scramble for acquisition the soul becomes stunted, stultified. But it is not destroyed; it bides its time. Suddenly, when the artificially stimulated hunger for wealth and tinsel has been satisfied, it rises and announces: "Here I am! You have permitted me to starve, but I demand my due."²⁷

Evelyn Kintner has analyzed the writer's technique in the Winesburg stories. Though Anderson treats ideas as well as plot,

he does not begin with either; people and concrete details and experience are his starting points. Taking a unit of experience which has for any reason organic pattern or significance, he gives the reader the keynote, the feeling that goes out of the character to the sensitive observer. Then the feeling is made concrete by recounting action which illustrates the feeling. The form of his best stories is lyrical rather than dramatic: their climax is not secured by a linear progression to a peak of interest. Their form is reminiscent of the Old Testament psalms.²⁸

²⁶Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1956), p. 162.

²⁷Fagin, op. cit., p. 49.

²⁸Evelyn Kintner, Sherwood Anderson, a Small Town Man (Unpublished Master's Thesis, Bowling Green State University, 1942), p. 111.

Since these four approaches have been well-stated many times, it will be more profitable to our development of the pattern of Anderson's career to notice that in Winesburg, Ohio there are four variations on the theme of salvation. The book is another illustration of Anderson's search for personal and national spiritual salvation. Anderson is investigating the possibility of deliverance in the past, in revolt, in sex, and in the understanding of life's hidden reality. All four variations are postulated as means of achieving salvation through the discovery of truth. His early novels were conceived in the same way, it is true, but with this important difference: the Winesburg characters all seek but none finds. Salvation was getting a little harder to find as Anderson matured. As he grew older (he was forty when he began publishing, one recalls), as the "old, sweet things"²⁹ he cherished became more remote in time and more fanciful in memory, Anderson may have had another awakening, this time to the probability that the longer his search continued the less likely was it to be successful.

The first of the four chances for salvation lay in the remembrance of and spiritual identification with things past. The allusion to Proust here is not irrelevant. Given

²⁹Poor White, p. 149.

fundamental differences of background and aesthetique, Anderson and Proust were akin in their separation from orthodox religion and from their age. What image can be found, they ask, that is satisfying to the imagination, consoling to the soul, and capable of being turned to literary account? It must not be tainted, if the imagination is to be satisfied, by anything to do with the abhorred contemporary state of things. It must manifest hope of salvation if the soul is to be consoled. Both men turned inevitably to the past--Anderson to a remembered age, Proust to remembered moments. By some uncanny mental process, a sensory stimulus could crystallize for Proust a whole area of time past. It seemed that the stimulus recalled another occasion of the same stimulus and with it a whole area of accompanying experiential detail. As a man, Proust tastes a kind of cake he has not eaten since childhood. Immediately he is mentally and sensuously projected into the middle of childhood to the occasion when last he ate this cake. Proust began to live for these momentary freakish upsets of the time sequence. Anderson, too, tells us in A Story Teller's Story that life is but a history of moments and that we can only be truly said to live at the relatively few climactic moments of our lives.

For Proust the climactic moment was the present recollection of things past; for Anderson's characters the moment was in the past but still controlling the continuing present. Most of the characters in Winesburg are as they are because of their reaction to the challenge of the climactic moment in their past. Not in the phenomenon of recollection (which was a psychic freak with Proust rather than an act of memory) but in what was recollected lay Anderson's hope (at least while he was writing Winesburg, Ohio, Mid-American Chants and Poor White) of salvation. Unlike the stranger in the Winesburg story, "Tandy," Anderson has found his thing to love. He was creating a mythical village microcosm as a means of recapturing the spiritual security of boyhood, the time when the soul is untroubled and safe. He could never quite do it again.

However, Anderson's need to live in the imaginary innocence of the pre-industrial past contained the threat of a tragic outcome. One can see this in the four-part story of Jesse Bentley which Anderson calls "Godliness." "Jesse Bentley was a fanatic," Anderson tells us. "He was a man born out of his time and place and for this he suffered and made others suffer. Never did he succeed in getting what he wanted." Jesse is a Presbyterian minister until the deaths of his father and then of his brothers destine him to take over the family farm. Ever on the lookout for a sign, Jesse,

with his fatal blend of egotism and fanaticism, attributes the change in his station to divine intervention. God wants him to take over the farming valley and become a type of Old Testament shepherd-patriarch to its community. This he does but in the process destroys the emotional normality of his daughter and grandson. On the night his daughter is to be born Jesse is out in the rain (where so many important things happen to Anderson's characters) pleading with God to send him a boy called David to help him slay the Philistines of his age. The child turns out to be a girl who throughout her life symbolizes God's disfavor to her father. The girl has a boy and he is called David. When David is a young lad, Jesse, muttering and wild-eyed, takes the boy and a lamb into the woods where he intends to make a sacrifice which will this time force a sign of approval from God. Confused and terrified when his grandfather draws a knife, David drops the lamb and almost kills Jesse with a stone from his sling. Telling himself "I have killed the man of God and now I will myself be a man and go into the world," he leaves Winesburg and is never heard of again.

"It happened because I was too greedy for glory," Jesse declared, and would have no more to say on the matter." His life becomes a bewildered effort to understand the story being told to him:

The beginning of the most materialistic age in the history of the world . . . when the will to power

would replace the will to serve, and beauty would be well-nigh forgotten in the terrible, headlong rush of mankind to the acquiring of possessions, . . . was telling its story to Jesse, the man of God, as it was to the men about him.³¹

Jesse's pathological vigil for the sign from God that never comes is matched by the search of Anderson, another "man born out of his time and place," for something to attach his faith to in the pre-industrial past.

Yet even while he is writing of it, Winesburg is changing before his eyes from a Caxton, Iowa (Windy McPherson's Son) to which Armageddon is coming, to a Coal Creek, Pennsylvania (Marching Men), where the battle has been fought and lost. So that even as Anderson turns to the corn it is being trampled before his eyes, and his realization of this has him wondering at the book's conclusion what there is in the world he must return to, his own world, to which he can give himself and belong with in order to avoid the threat of spiritual destruction. In "Death" the "some one else"³² that George Willard, the hero of the book, imagines to be under the shroud in place of his mother is, of course, his dead Winesburg self which he is to leave behind finally in the last story of the book, "Departure." Willard, who

³¹Sherwood Anderson, Winesburg, Ohio (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1919), pp. 61, 109, 109, 79-80. Hereafter this title will be abbreviated to WO.

³²Ibid., p. 283.

represents Anderson in the stories, is symbolic in this incident of Anderson relinquishing the dead self of his Winesburg vision, abandoning hope in the corn. For George Willard, "the town of Winesburg had disappeared and his life there had become but a background on which to paint the dreams of his manhood."³³

Thus the apparent contradiction one sees at first glance between Winesburg, Ohio as a revolt from the village³⁴ and a return to the village resolves itself into the cruel betrayal of Anderson by his vision. Anderson returns to the world of his childhood or of everybody's childhood (and this is the book's appeal) but the closer he comes to it the more discouraged is he by what he sees. Expecting to find the beauty of salvation here, Anderson has the newborn beast of industry thrust rudely in his way. And in one way or another this birth has resulted in a living death for Anderson's "grotesques."

The "grotesques" are the vehicles of Anderson's search for deliverance through revolt. They are not grotesques

³³Ibid., p. 303.

³⁴As Frederick J. Hoffman has remarked, "the major, symptomatic gesture of this /revolt-from-the-village/ fiction had its precedent in Sherwood Anderson's dramatic and romanticized 'walking out' from his business office in Elyria, Ohio." The Modern Novel In America, 1900-1950 (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), p. 106/.

in the ordinary sense or in the sense Poe used the word in his Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque.³⁵ These people appear grotesque in latter-day Winesburg because they alone have remained true to themselves. It is not that they are abnormal, but that normality is something different now. A new set of social values (religious, moral, ethical) have been made necessary by the new industrial order. As yet the new values are but vaguely understood though accepted by nearly all. There are a few, however, who question the new values, perhaps because they alone understand them. These few are the "grotesques," people who have at some time accepted the challenge to fight for the old things and have struck out nobly, as Anderson did in 1912, for the inviolability of individual expression, the right of self-realization, and the sanctity of the life force. As a result of their actions, they have been cut off, excommunicated from the community of the town and virtually left for dead. Their fellowmen, one might think, are not particularly desirable specimens, but with Anderson it is a question of the fundamental spiritual gregariousness of man which, when starved, must lead to his spiritual death.

³⁵See "The Book of the Grotesque" (the original title of the collection) in WO, pp. 1-5. The best critical discussion of the theory of the "grotesques" is in Howe, op. cit., pp. 99-106.

What makes the plight of some of the "grotesques" living in shabby hotels or in shacks at the end of town even more pathetic is that they have not even successfully negotiated the one important event in their lives. Having brooded the better part of their lives on whether or not to revolt, they finally make a mess of the job. Elizabeth Willard, George's mother, is such a one. Her revolt comes in early life when in an effort to break through her wall of isolation (this figure occurs time without number in Anderson), she commits some indiscretions and acquires a reputation (far exceeding its grounds) as a girl of no very firm morals. She is finally pressured and panicked into marrying a hotel keeper and drudging the rest of her life for him. Since her husband is a modification of Irwin Anderson, any love between them is impossible, and she finds herself as firmly as ever behind her wall of isolation again. She had been given a sum of eight hundred dollars on her wedding day but she never revealed this to her husband, keeping it always as insurance against the time when she would dare escape. She never dares and she dies with the money still in the wall behind her bed. She was "unable to give up her dream of release," says Anderson, "the release that after all came to her but twice in her life, in the moments when her lovers Death and Doctor Reefy [into whose arms she spontaneously falls one day shortly before

her death⁷ held her in their arms."³⁶

Isolation is the only reward of these unregenerate outsiders, and is seemingly independent of the success or failure of their revolt. Initially they are ostracized because their motives are misunderstood and then because of a neurotic inarticulateness born of their isolation. To say, as nearly every critic does, that most of these characters would never be seen outside of a psychiatrist's case book is to conceal the truth that Anderson is here touching with beautiful control on the essence of the human condition. His "grotesques" are normality heightened for emphasis by art. Somehow, they emerge as pure beings, inescapably human. If they belong in a psychiatrist's case book, then don't we all? This is brought out by Wing Biddlebaum, the fat and frightened little hero of "Hands" (the opening story), who was judged by the parents of the boys he taught to be a latent homosexual. Anderson is at pains to explain, however, that his caresses of the boys are a manifestation of a very altruistic love of the human mind as a God-given vehicle for knowledge and human understanding. The subtlety of the tale is that Anderson offers no assurance that the reader would have judged the school teacher in any other way. Who then is the real "grotesque"--Biddlebaum for his pedagogic idealism? or the

³⁶WO, p. 284.

townspeople (or the reader) for seeing evil where precisely its opposite exists?

There is uncertainty as to the fate of those who revolt, as Anderson had revolted, for personal freedom from socially imposed obligations. Ostracism is certainly one inevitable result, but the question of whether or not the type of personal freedom achieved is worth the isolation is not always positively answered. In a sense, Anderson could not answer this question at this early and inconclusive stage of his writing career. He was not sure what his severing of domestic ties would ultimately come to mean for him. This uncertainty as to the end of the revolt for personal freedom is a major or minor theme in many of the Winesburg stories, but its best expression is in "The Untold Lie" and "Loneliness." In the first story Ray Pearson, who years ago wound up marrying a girl he took into the woods because she wanted to go, is the workmate of Hal Winters, one of a family of "fighters and woman-chasers, and generally all-around bad ones," who half-jokingly seeks Ray's advice on whether or not he should marry a girl he has "got into trouble." On going home Ray comes to the full realization that the fortuity of life has robbed him of freedom and growth and placed him in servitude, and he decides to tell Hal not to marry the girl. He is on his way to do so when Hal intercepts him with his decision to marry her. "I want to settle down and have kids," he says. Ray feels like "laughing at himself

and all the world. . . . 'It's just as well. Whatever I told him would have been a lie,' he concludes.³⁷

In "Loneliness," Enoch Robinson is the emotionally arrested individual one sometimes suspects his author of being. Enoch "never grew up and of course he couldn't understand people and he couldn't make people understand him." He was "a complete egotist, as all children are egotists. He did not want friends for the quite simple reason that no child wants friends." He escapes Winesburg to take up a room in New York where he explicates pictures he has painted of the Winesburg landscape first to uncomprehending and nervous guests and then to the phantoms of his imagination. He marries but when he begins to feel "choked and walled in" he rents his old room again, quits his wife, and goes "out of the world of men altogether." "And so Enoch Robinson stayed in the New York room among the people of his fancy, playing with them, talking to them, happy as a child is happy." Another woman intrudes into his life, however, and this time his precarious equilibrium is completely upset. She senses his handicap. "A look came into her eyes," says Enoch, "and I knew she did understand . . . I was furious. . . . I wanted her to understand but, don't you see, I couldn't let her understand. I felt

³⁷Ibid., pp. 246, 248, 253, 253.

that then she would know everything, that I would be submerged, drowned out, you see." He returns to Winesburg, "a little wrinkled man-boy,"³⁸ to confess himself to the curiously priest-like George Willard. His personal freedom has led to tragedy³⁹ just as surely as his domestic enslavement ever would have.

Enoch is rebelling against the hard and fast realities it is man's lot to endure, yet so strong is the element of fantasy Anderson employs with Enoch that reality almost seems irrelevant to his problem. Alfred Kazin would apply the same criticism to Anderson's work as a whole. "His heroes were forever rebelling against the material," he says, "yet they were all, like Anderson himself, sublimely unconscious of it."⁴⁰ In the novels, where Anderson's technique reveals every one of its flaws, the characters often speak in mental impulses rather than realistic dialogue and appear to be little more than dramatized states of mind.

The third possibility for salvation was through sex.

³⁸Ibid., pp. 198, 202, 204, 205, 210, 211.

³⁹One cannot help but notice the striking parallel between this story and the end, years later, of Anderson's brother Earl. Like Enoch he went to New York, lived and painted alone in a room, and was forgotten by the world and even his family.

⁴⁰Kazin, op. cit., p. 168. The question of Anderson's place in literary realism in America is adequately discussed (pp. 162-173) in Kazin's book.

Far too much has been made of what his more clinical critics label as Anderson's obsession with sex, his erotomania, his being a sort of phallic Chekhov. Though the question of Anderson's use of sex will be taken up fully in the next chapter, it should be put in its true perspective at this point. Sex is always a secondary, or subordinated motive, a means to an end in Anderson. The end is always communion--for the sake of mankind or as an escape from the isolated self. Most of Anderson's sexually promiscuous characters are immature enough to imagine their isolation, loneliness, or psychic inversion will be ended through physical union with another. Some of his less immature characters (really there are no adults in Anderson) sense that sex is not the answer but are human enough to have to find this out for themselves. None is mature or courageous enough to admit that there is no answer; and in the measure that he was searching for the answer to isolation there could be no answer for Anderson. Maxwell Geismar has put the question of sex in Anderson well: "Very early you realize," he says, "that his concern is not with human copulation, as it were, but with human isolation; and sex, which is a prelude to love as well as an ending, is the method used by Anderson, like D. H. Lawrence, to convey this isolation."⁴¹ This method of personal salvation

⁴¹Geismar, op. cit., p. 168.

through the communion of sex is sometimes a part of the salvation-through-revolt method. The people who revolt with any success in Winesburg are those for whom the wall of isolation is not impossibly thick. The others find that their revolt merely increases man's normal allotment of isolation. So they are willing to try for communion through sex if withdrawal through revolt has failed as a way to salvation. However, since sex in Anderson is always adultery or fornication, the new attempt at salvation is merely another form of revolt having the same result as before--ostracization, isolation, loneliness. They are still "grotesques," still lovers who have not found their thing to love.

The question of the degree to which sex can be the effective medium of total communication between individuals is taken up by Anderson's Winesburg representative, George Willard, in "Nobody Knows" and "Sophistication." The first story is the simplest of six-page narratives about the clandestine meeting of a boy and girl for the old purpose. Louise Trunnion, "not particularly comely and there was a black smudge on the side of her nose," has sent Willard a brief, determined note--"I'm yours if you want me"-- and goes through with the assignation in the same way.⁴² Though Willard's motive in accepting the invitation is clear enough,

⁴²WO, pp. 52, 51.

nothing is said about Louise. Both youngsters are awkward and inarticulate and Louise speaks only three times. And yet, because of her uncoquettish, sober determination, her calm knowledge of what she is doing (both of which are contrasted to Willard's what-a-lark attitude), Louise emerges from behind the dreariness and stultification of her home life as the embodiment of man's eternal struggle, futile as it is dauntless, against isolation. Willard is not a cad, Louise is not a trollop in this story. Anderson is not a judge here, but a prophet.

In the often-anthologized "Sophistication" Anderson is at his best--treating adolescent gropings towards maturity. All the wonder, confusion, and nostalgia of adolescence are here; and his evocative gift in this regard is no doubt his surest appeal. Before he leaves Winesburg, George Willard goes to see Helen White, the banker's daughter and the girl most likely to marry the boy most likely to succeed. At night they walk through the town, silently counting the memories, and wistfully musing about whether or not something will be catalyzed between them as the result of George's decision to leave town. Sophistication, the feeling that it won't really count, causes them to cut short their few eager kisses, but before they part they are "In some way chastened and purified by the mood they had been in and become⁷, not man and woman, not boy and girl, but excited little animals." In the feeling of oneness thus generated

by the spontaneous rough and tumble down the hillside, they become for the moment soulmates. In their sophisticated attitude towards sex, they had "taken hold of the thing that makes the mature life of men and women in the modern world possible."⁴³ These two, then, have had at least one moment in the history of their lives when the isolating wall was broken down, when their personal salvation was but a promise away.

Maybe sex is the answer--for some. But, says Anderson, there are the Doctor Reefys. Doctor Reefy begins his first courtship at the age of forty-five when "already he had begun the practice of filling his pockets with the scraps of paper [on which "were written thoughts, ends of thoughts, beginnings of thoughts"] that became hard little balls and were thrown away." He is like one of those "gnarled, twisted apples" found on the frost-covered ground and into which at "a little round place at the side . . . has been gathered all of its sweetness." One of the few who knows "the sweetness of the twisted apples" (because she is one herself) is the "tall dark girl" who comes to the doctor in a pregnant condition. She has been persistently courted by two suitors, one "a slender young man with white hands who talked continually of virginity," and the other "a black-haired boy with

⁴³Ibid., pp. 298, 299.

large ears, who said nothing at all but always managed to get her into the darkness where he began to kiss her." Though she has a recurring dream about the imagined lustfulness of the slender young man, she becomes pregnant by the one who says nothing. The child miscarries, the girl marries the doctor, and dies in less than a year. "During the winter he read to her all of the odds and ends of thoughts he had scribbled on the bits of paper. After he had read them he laughed and stuffed them away in his pockets to become round hard balls."⁴⁴ Both are unable to lead normal sexual lives because of a socially (in the case of the doctor) and morally (in the case of the wife) unbalanced world. The doctor sublimates his physical and intellectual virility by turning his thoughts into the paper pills which will never germinate. Finally he marries another "twisted apple," only to be driven helplessly into a kind of intellectual onanism.

The doctor is one who intuits the hidden reality of life (the fourth possibility for salvation) and perhaps the fact that he has the wisdom to laugh as he relinquishes his paper pills (symbolic of all that remains of his manliness, his natural function of procreation) implies some kind of salvation for him. The doctor's almost accidental intuitions

⁴⁴Ibid., pp. 20-23.

bring to mind Anderson's major purpose in writing Winesburg, Ohio. The book is an investigation by Anderson into the hidden reality of things as a possible way to salvation. If one can only understand the plan, or get at the truth behind human relationships, might not one in some way wrest salvation from this knowledge?⁴⁵ What Anderson learned from his writing of Winesburg, Ohio was that there was no plan or pattern; life was an unpredictable series of unpredictable accidents. Any man who tries to lead his life the way he wants to is a fool. It took no small amount of courage, needless to say, for Anderson to continue his search in the face of this realization.

In Winesburg, Ohio Anderson is looking for the hidden essence of life. To quote Ernest Boyd, the stories "are written out of the depths of a prolonged brooding over the fascinating spectacle of existence, but they combine that quality with a marvelous faculty of precise observation. Thus the impression of surface realism is reinforced by that deeper realism which sees beyond and beneath the exterior world to the hidden reality which is the essence of things."⁴⁶ The essence of things was a rather

⁴⁵"Anderson's philosophy, as well as his mysticism, centers upon what may be called the problem of deliverance. It is based upon a tragic feeling of the complexities of the human self, on the necessity and difficulty of extracting from the subconscious labyrinth our real personality." (Michaud, op. cit., p. 185).

⁴⁶Ernest Boyd, "Introduction," Winesburg, Ohio (Second Edition; New York: The Modern Library, 1921), p. xv.

disheartening picture, Anderson found, which his readers, in the days before Freud crept into everyday speech, simply refused to accept. The result of the too-sudden changeover from one way of life to another had been social disorganization leading in turn to widespread neurasthenia, anxiety, and psychic inversion. New codes of every kind had to be found. How could the Christian religion, the precepts and language of which were oriented to a primitive, agrarian society, be made to accommodate fiercely competitive and individual enterprise and industrialism's homogenization of mankind? How irrelevant to talk of the virtue in Christian charity when the condition of survival was to get there before the other fellow! And this moral impasse obtained also in the small country town, in the almost sacrosanct area that Americans have always clung to as a last reservoir of the Christian virtues, as a symbol of normality and healthful living. This, more than any other reason, was why the book was burned.

Finally, the hidden reality is contributing some deeper tones to the portrait of a young man Anderson has been steadily painting. And the young man is Anderson himself. The book is a unified record of young George Willard's growing up, of his rise to consciousness; and this, together with the unifying sustained pastoral lyricism, is why Anderson could call the book a novel as well as a short story

collection. George first experiences nostalgia for the past towards the end of "Sophistication," where he "for the first time [takes] the backward view of life";⁴⁷ his resolution to quit Winesburg is the most meaningful form of revolt for him; he progresses from the debasement (in "Nobody Knows") to the mystery (in "Sophistication") of sex; and, through his priest-confessor role to nearly all the "grotesques," he is constantly learning of the hidden reality. Willard-Anderson is a newspaper reporter who wants to become a writer--and what he will report and write about is, of course, the hidden reality of life against the background of the town of Winesburg. In this will be his salvation.

IV

Poor White appeared in the fall of 1920. It was the second Anderson novel Ben Heusch had published and at last the reviews justified a publisher's persevering with him. Fanny Butcher, in the Chicago Tabloid, spoke of Poor White's author as "a literary colossus, the Apollo of the new age in America."⁴⁸ Louis Untermeyer saw its characters moving in "cloudy splendor; they stumble in a half-light pierced by terrific flashes; they are uncanny, primitive, grotesque,

⁴⁷WO, 286.

⁴⁸News clipping in Newberry Anderson Collection.

and fearfully alive."⁴⁹ After these first fine careless raptures, however, the Manchester Guardian haughtily observed in 1929 that "Art may magnify truth, but it can never manufacture it, not even in Bidwell";⁵⁰ and a few months before Régis Michaud had judged that the novel's only value resided "in the Freudian sketches aside from the main plot, and in the analysis of the pathological forms of sensibility."⁵¹ But, despite these slings and arrows, Poor White is still generally rated, with Dark Laughter, as Anderson's best book.

Within the pattern of Anderson's search Poor White represents a further quest for salvation. This time Anderson is seeking salvation through communion, active and sincere, at the two levels of good works and sex.⁵² It would seem inevitable, to the reader of Anderson thus far, that these attempts at self-realization through communion (first with

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Michaud, op. cit., p. 182.

⁵²See Michaud, op. cit., p. 171. Michaud is writing of Beaut McPherson but his remarks are equally applicable to Hugh McVey: "Beaut represents the two stages of the American conscience, the Christian and the primitive. Half of his life was spent like that of Theodore Dreiser's heroes. He succeeded practically; that is, he failed . . . spiritually." It is possible that the two levels of search (good works and sex) can be interpreted as Christian and primitive expressions, respectively.

society, then with the individual) will be defeated. For the first time, however, Anderson has given us a character whose Emersonian self-reliance is so strong that it might, had he not been taught to stifle it from shame, convert the handicap of isolation into the strength of salvation. Anderson, if the experience of Hugh McVey is in this respect autobiographical, is wondering if he himself has the self-reliance necessary to make unnecessary the old questioning of life. But though some of his later characters, such as Bruce Dudley (Dark Laughter) and Kit Brandon (in the novel of that name), are rather freebooting vagabonds, the purity of independence of this "veritable stereotype of pre-industrial man,"⁵³ as Frederick Hoffman calls him, never recurs. Had Anderson been able honestly to discover any large measure of self-reliance in himself he would not have needed the sustenance provided by the life-long act of searching and recording the search.

In relation to his writings so far, Poor White is Anderson's strongest statement of the eternal literary theme of isolation. "All men," he says, "lead their lives behind a wall of misunderstanding they themselves have built, and most men die in silence and unnoticed behind the walls."⁵⁴ Both minor and major characters in the book seem to embody

⁵³Hoffman, op. cit., p. 107.

⁵⁴Poor White, p. 227.

this across-the-board vision, and in this context the remark of N. Bryllion Fagin's that "Poor White is more like a collection of stories" (twenty-nine in all) takes on an enriched meaning. For although all of them, as Fagin says, "merge into the life which gave them birth-- the inner life of a changed and changing America,"⁵⁵ the stories are fragmentary episodes in the lives of people at measureless distances of sympathy from one another.⁵⁶ Not only is this the impression created when the story is told from the viewpoints of the two leading characters, Hugh McVey and Clara Butterworth, but from the author's viewpoint (which is too much in evidence) as well.

The person at the farthest distance from others is Hugh McVey. Poor White is the ironic record of the unwitting individualist pushed further away from communion by his adoption of the very measure he hopes will make him one with his fellows. The paradox is another of those freakish accidents of life which are so recurrent because so funda-

⁵⁵Fagin, op. cit., p. 41.

⁵⁶As usual Anderson masterfully sketches in the minor characters. There is Joe Wainsworth, the old harness maker who knows "It ain't right" to sell factory-made harnesses; Allie Mulberry, the village idiot whose whittling genius creates the working models of Hugh's machines; Harley Parsons, who returns to Bidwell in a silk vest with news of the wonders of the East, and whose ambition is to be with a woman of every nationality-- an ironic incarnation of his country's destiny.

mental in Anderson. It was noticed at the end of the preceding chapter that Anderson never went back to the theme of Marching Men again and in fact Poor White goes in exactly the opposite direction. Whereas, Beaut McGregor is a man who finds an old solution for a new problem, Hugh ignores the new problem and spends his life in a shy and futile effort to come close to, to serve and to love his fellows, according to the pre-industrial code by which he lives. But both books are indictments of society (belonging to the labor-novel-of-protest genre of the time), with the later one rising occasionally to a Swiftian savagery,⁵⁷ and their conclusions are quite similar. Both McGregor and McVey (after his awakening) finally attempt to find salvation, like Saint Francis, in humility and renunciation. That humility and renunciation could be only temporarily accepted by Anderson will be seen in the turn of his next two books, Many Marriages and Dark Laughter.

If his first two novels showed salvation to be impossible in the industrialized city and unlikely in the industrializing village, Winesburg, Ohio is Anderson's conscious attempt, through a pastoral vision or through a refreshing jump from the springboard of reality into a different world, to recreate the pre-industrial village as it was. We noticed though, that even in the village of those days Anderson could

⁵⁷See the allegory of the mice, pp. 114-115.

not ignore the fatal symptoms of industrialism. Willis, he realized, was in those days already a mechanic in an Indiana town and Ford a repair man in a bicycle shop in Detroit. In Poor White Anderson takes a second jump, as it were, to look even more closely at what he had seen beneath the placid surface of the American village. As the author remarks of Bidwell in his introduction to the Modern Library edition (1925) of Poor White, "the town was really the hero of the book."⁵⁸

Poor White's first two books can be interpreted as a socio-psychological study of the process of industrialization among the people of a representative American town in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Unfortunately, the whole of the book is usually interpreted in the same way. Though as a self-avowed primitivist Anderson is careful to avoid technical language, Poor White reveals a progression in psychology from the intuitive to the technical. Indeed according to M. Michaud, Anderson's style has progressed to where it "is now characterized by the obsession of the subconscious and the study of morbid psychology."⁵⁹

What there is of obsession and morbidity in the book (and there is not much when Anderson's real purpose is kept

⁵⁸Poor White, p. vi.

⁵⁹Michaud, op. cit., p. 181.

in mind) results from the circumstance that Bidwell is arriving in a new age which brings with it new values. The virtue in acquisitiveness, the sin in failure, the superiority of the business man to the craftsman, the final deification of the idea of progress, the value of money over hard work, the special dispensation to lie assumed by the advertising writer and press agent -- all were new and had to be learned. Likewise the new slogans: "It's money makes the mare go," "Don't let the other fellow get in the way of progress," "When you put your hand to the plough, don't turn back," "Nothing ventured, nothing gained," and above all, "Get on in the world."

Hugh is not aware that the new age is spawning new values and his consequently abortive attempt to integrate himself with the town, or with his concept of it as a pre-industrial village, is Anderson's further attempt at seeking the spiritual security, the salvation-attesting solace he had convinced himself must have existed in pre-industrial America. As was the case with the imaginary innocence of Winesburg, the security and the solace were not to be found. The tragic irony of Hugh's attempt is that he realizes too late that he is his own and Bidwell's unwitting nemesis and that he has made Bidwell into a symbol of the death of something in America that should not have been allowed to die.

A "listless and anemic descendant of Huck Finn,"⁶⁰ Hugh McVey spends a boyhood fishing and sleeping on the shores of the Mississippi at a town with the improbable name of Mudcat Landing, Missouri.⁶¹ The opening bids fair, especially when we learn that Hugh's mother is dead and his father the town drunk, to echo Mark Twain, but quite early in the book Hugh is taken firmly in hand by Sarah Shepard, described by R. M. Lovett as "the spirit of New England brooding on the vast abyss of the Middle West and making it pregnant,"⁶² and the echoes, apart from the reiterated notes of nature lyricism, quickly die. One wonders, though, whether Twain's savant in patched breeches might not have become another McVey, the inventor Anderson referred to as "the mysterious stranger from Missouri."⁶³

Hugh is forbidden his dreams and scolded into making himself useful to society. Ironically, though, Hugh's greatest usefulness proves to be the direct result of his inability to surrender his dreams. When Sarah Shepard

⁶⁰Chase, op. cit., p. 51.

⁶¹See Poor White, pp. 18-19, for Anderson's explanation of the origins of the poor whites of the South.

⁶²R. M. Lovett, in a newspaper clipping of the Newberry Collection.

⁶³Poor White, p. 92.

and her husband leave town because their zealous adherence to the tenets of Poor Richard's Almanac ("Do little things well and big opportunities are bound to come")⁶⁴ has simply not paid off, Hugh is left with an inferiority complex concerning his "poor-white" origins (the complex contrasting oddly with his dream of a "vague and glorious future"),⁶⁵ and a neurotic dread of being caught or catching himself loafing.

Because he wants "to become acquainted with and be the friend of people whose lives were beautifully lived,"⁶⁶ he leaves Mudcat Landing in September, 1886, heading always eastward, looking for and seeing in his fancy "the right place and the right people."⁶⁷ Eventually he lights on Bidwell (probably Akron),⁶⁸ Ohio, as "the place where happiness was to come to him and where he was to achieve companionship with men and women."⁶⁹ To prevent himself from daydreaming at his job in a railroad ticket office, Hugh sends off for a course in applied mechanics and is soon

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 16.

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 17.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 22.

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 37.

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 330, 351.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 32.

using his skill to do something about his compassion for the farm laborers of Bidwell who have been crippled and brutalized by the nature of their work. He invents several pieces of labor-saving farm machinery, but the old-fashioned attempts of Hugh to love and serve society are quickly subjected to the rapacity of Steve Hunter and Tom Butterworth, two of the new breed of industrial entrepreneurs.

Steve, who at the age of fourteen was hit over the head by his spastic and neurotic sister with a wrench and has been saying ever since "Whatever anyone says, I tell you what, I'm a man,"⁷⁰ is an early Rotarian-type promoter. Tom Butterworth is the genially wealthy farmer coarsened and carried "very far from the old sweet things"⁷¹ by commercialism. These two mass-produce, market and capitalize on the still inarticulate, still isolated Hugh's inventions. Not thinking beyond the immediate need to lighten labor (as Bidwell did not), Hugh cannot see (as Bidwell could not) beyond the immediate good his sincere concern with society must bring. Hugh has a recurrent "cloud dream in which the world became a whirling, agitated center of disaster,"⁷² but Sarah Shepard had taught him to pay no attention to such nonsense. His inventive genius (but not his quality as an

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 113.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 149.

⁷²Ibid., p. 39.

individual) recognized in Bidwell, Hugh McVey becomes overnight a lonely hero, "something more than human [like Lincoln, Grant and Garfield]"⁷³ in the minds of Bidwell. . . . The broad, rich land demanded gigantic figures, and the minds of men had created the figures."⁷⁴

After the sexual histories of Hugh and Clara Butterworth have been separately given, the two meet and quickly marry. Hugh bolts from their room on the wedding night, however, resolved that he "won't let her do it."⁷⁵ To the gentle, shy Hugh she is inviolable. He won't let her sacrifice her intactness for the chance that in her he might find his salvation. It takes him some time to realize that her intactness, the wall of her own isolation is precisely what she needs to sacrifice for her personal redemption. The truth is, of course, that the union can never mean complete or even complementary fulfillment to either since Clara's incompleteness is the same as Hugh's. Like Hugh, Clara is virginal, innocent, confused, tired of substitutes for living. Since Hugh's sexuality is fixed at the idealistic level of adolescence, he finds it impossible to enter into a mature relationship and Clara, whose brushes with latent lesbians and socialists in college have not matured her appreciably,

⁷³Ibid., 252.

⁷⁴Loc. cit.

⁷⁵Poor White, p. 310.

lacks the emotional strength to love him uninhibitedly. Hugh overcomes his qualms the next day and the couple are reconciled finally into a mother-son relationship. "To her then and forever after Hugh was no hero, remaking the world, but a perplexed boy hurt by life."⁷⁶ He is perplexed because he has not found in Bidwell, a typical example of what the American village has become, "the right place and the right people," the old sense of community, the old innocence of American life. None of these is in Bidwell, and Hugh is perplexed because he cannot think of a likelier place to look.

At the end of Book II some critics say the plot splits, making two quite different stories out of the total narrative. Schevill says the opening theme of the industrial history of a town runs in conflict to the early portrayal of Hugh McVey and clashes again with the struggle towards sexual maturity of Hugh McVey and Clara Butterworth.⁷⁷ Irving Howe believes that the first part, "which constitutes a beautifully proportioned portrait of the transition from the craftsman's town to the factory town in late-nineteenth-century America," loses its focus of attention later in a "study of disturbed sexuality" as the story of Clara Butterworth splits the novel

⁷⁶Ibid., p. 368.

⁷⁷Shevill, op. cit., pp. 127-129.

in half, a wound never quite healed."⁷⁸ Jarvis A. Thurston also says that "this novel, like the early stories, starts with a theme that is not maintained":

After many chapters Hugh is an industrial success and Anderson arrives at that point in his book where factories are built and where he is to show the effects of factory life on Bidwell and its people. . . . But at the beginning of Book III, Anderson takes up quite another theme and follows it, though not uninterruptedly, to a conclusion, a conclusion in which he does attempt to relate the two parts of the book.⁷⁹

The other theme he mentions is Clara Butterworth's story, of course.

And yet these critics are all agreed that Poor White is one of the best, if not the best of Anderson's novels. It has more, they argue, than is seen by Cleveland Chase who describes it as "the story, so dear to American ears, of the penniless country lad who makes a fortune," neatly labelled with the moral that "money and the power that goes with it don't make a man happy."⁸⁰ This seems a little inconsistent, a little like knocking poor Anderson down with one hand, perhaps, and picking him up apologetically with the other. These critics are unable to reconcile critical intuitions and critical scruples. They sense the book is good, yet they have to own

⁷⁸Howe, op. cit., pp. 124, 124, 129.

⁷⁹Thurston, op. cit., pp. 182-183.

⁸⁰Chase, op. cit., p. 51.

that it contains a disqualifying flaw in structure.

The truth is that there is no split at all--neither in structure nor theme. Both parts--the story of Hugh and Bidwell and the story of Hugh and Clara--are two variations on the same theme of salvation-seeking. When Hugh, in his dumbly intuitive way, senses that "the invisible roof under which the life of the town and the surrounding country was lived"⁸¹ does not extend as far as Pickleville (the beyond-town railroad station where he works), and that in any event Bidwell does not have what his soul needs for its fulfillment, he turns to Clara. Surely Anderson, if he has the literary tact these critics credit him with, cannot be expected in each part to pop out of the delicately controlled flow of Hugh's consciousness signalling with one red flag marked "Bidwell" then another marked "Clara". One almost believes that the majority of Poor White's critics have never read past the end of Book II. It is rather a pity, in this connection, that so much of Andersonian criticism has been sociological in one degree or another. He is not "primarily a social novelist"⁸² as even his most insistent social critic, Irving Howe, has confessed. Only if the book is interpreted in toto as a sociological tract are the two parts quite incompatible.

That the book is more than the history of Bidwell's

⁸¹Poor White, p. 62.

⁸²Howe, op. cit., p. 123.

change in manners and mores is implied in one of the places where Anderson speaks of his book as the history of a town. In a 1931 interview with his future wife, Eleanor Copenhaver, Anderson says that,

In Poor White I have tried to dramatize the effect of the coming of industry upon a people that have suddenly come out of Europe, out of an old civilization, into America. I have tried to show how the growth of industry affected the life of every citizen of the town, how almost at once it began to kill off old leaders and make new leaders, how and why money became of increased importance, how the new life affected marriage, and all of the relationships between all of the people of the town.⁸³

One need look no further than the first sentence for the key to the novel. The dramatization of the conflict has been done in the only way it could have been done, through human conflict; and that human conflict is centered in and symbolized by Hugh McVey. The town's experience is summed up in the experience of McVey, the unwitting contributor to its destruction, the symbol of its industrial progress and spiritual atrophy. But the town is secondary; it was people alone who held the magnetic fascination for Anderson. Those who have taken literally Anderson's provocative comment in his Modern Library introduction that "the town was really the hero of the book" are guilty of critical naivete or have not availed themselves of the opportunity to read the remarks just quoted.

Because Hugh never seems to say or do much the plot

⁸³Newberry Collection.

seems to overbalance in favor of the town. But if the book is to have any level of meaning beneath its plot, it cannot be interpreted simply as the record of Bidwell's metamorphosis unless more than half the total number of pages is disregarded. When the true pattern is seen--that of Hugh McVey's two-part search for salvation--the book emerges not as both Anderson's best and worst book (the two epithets making nonsense of each other), but as a unified statement of the ultimate futility in human relationships. Hugh's perplexity about people so increases as the novel progresses (his character is developed inversely, one might say) that the reader rightly suspects one of Anderson's awakenings is going to be the only fitting dénouement. The "showdown" comes while Hugh is riding in Bidwell's first automobile, the same one that is carrying off to jail Joe Wainsworth, the old craftsman who has killed his usurping young employee in protest against the new age. Hugh is startled into the realization that one can only avoid drowning in the stream of life if he bobs along on the surface, not getting closer to the other swimmers than the nature of the current will permit. To get too close, or dive too deep, is certain destruction.

It is not certain that Anderson had more than a suspicion of where this book had led him. Since the rest of his books continue to posit the necessity as well as the futility of human relationships, perhaps he had not. More likely is it that he lacked the courage to accept the findings this stage

of the quest had brought, and went on asking whether the truth of salvation can be in communion with others, in human relationships--knowing the question had been answered, but knowing, too, there was no other question to be asked.

V

With paeans to the earth gods that conceal the poverty neither of its ideas nor its poetry, Mid-American Chants announces the new hope of deliverance from "Chicago triumphant."⁸⁴ However, in Winesburg, Ohio, most of which was written at the same time as the Chants, the fanfare gives way to a threnody of nostalgia as doubts arise that the corn may have been cut for the last time. Winesburg, which is partly the image of the pre-industrial American village, and partly that of the shape of things to come, contains people who, having alienated themselves from their age, find they are also cut off from life. Like Anderson, they have no faith, no ideal to attach themselves to. They are disillusioned and alone. Poor White, published two years after Winesburg, Ohio, is Anderson's further evaluation of the hope that may be in the corn, of the chances of rediscovering the lost, hidden and half-forgotten loveliness of American life. At the same time it is a study of a lonely man's vain attempts to find the old sense of community, "the right place and the right people," in the American village while it is

⁸⁴MAC, p. 16.

changing forever. More broadly, it is a sombre study of the isolation of the individual in the twentieth century.

Although the American village is changing forever, Poor White concludes by once more tentatively settling on the values traditionally associated with the village. Thus the second stage of Anderson's search for spiritual salvation at a personal and national level ends in much the same way as the first. Hugh McVey, the "poor white" of the title, is "unfilled by the life he led"⁸⁵ until the girl he has just married tells him she is pregnant with, she feels sure, "a man child."⁸⁶ Then, with his wife and unborn child, Hugh re-enters the farmhouse, indifferent (at least temporarily) to "the great whistling and screaming"⁸⁷ of the factories in the town below. The Anderson hero is once more brought to the humility and renunciation he has salvaged from the pre-industrial past, until yet another reincarnation of the type (the John Webster of Many Marriages) will rise up to renew the search.

⁸⁵Poor White, p. 370.

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 371.

⁸⁷Loc. cit.

CHAPTER SIX

THE WHITE WONDER OF LIFE

"A time will come when love like a sheet of fire will run through the towns and cities. It will tear walls away. It will destroy ugly houses. It will tear ugly clothes off the bodies of men and women. They will build anew and build beautifully."¹

With the appearance of Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, Anderson was approaching the depths of spiritual crisis. Ever since 1912 his search for "the right place and the right people" had met with failure. The truth, the permanent salvation he sought, had evaded him. He had remained uncertain even about the most desirable attitude for the seeker to adopt towards his search. The indignant Sam McPherson, the furious Beaut McGregor, the dreamy Hugh McVey-- none had done more than arrive at the position he started from. Each had decided that there was no alternative but to return in spirit to the Winesburg of his origins. But Winesburg had changed; there was no pre-industrial past to return to. And in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, Anderson and his heroes are wondering what there is in this world where they must remain to which they can give themselves in order not only to sustain their search for spiritual salvation, but to avert the threat of spiritual destruction.

¹Sherwood Anderson, Many Marriages (New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1923), p. 78.

What they give themselves to is sex, or, as Anderson prefers to call it, "the white wonder of life."² Sex is to be the medium for realization of the self, and for universal communion. In addition, through its pure and elemental emotions, sex is to bring man back to the condition of purity and primitive nobility he enjoyed in his pre-industrial state. In this last respect, of course, sex was no new direction for Anderson's search to have taken.

II

The plot of Many Marriages is a two-hundred-and-sixty page expansion of a short story that had appeared serially in the Dial. Anderson himself considered the story to be subtle; but its redundancies, vagaries, and self-consciously liturgical style destroy its power. Artistically, it represents the failure of the story of failure. Cleveland Chase draws wry consolation from this; for, he says, "Were it not so thoroughly confused and meaningless, it would come very close to being immoral."³ Be this as it may, it is virtually on the level of soap opera, and the reader half expects a melodramatic continuation--the life together of Webster and the "other woman", Natalie Swartz.

²The metaphor occurs twice in Anderson, once in Windy McPherson's Son (p. 201), and once in The Triumph of the Egg (New York: B. W. Huebsch, Inc., 1921), p. 238.

³Chase, op. cit., p. 54.

The book is divided structurally into three parts: an introductory statement of the conjugal problem of John Webster, a confrontation of his family with the problem, and his final desertion of his family for his secretary. John Webster is introduced to us as a middle-aged "rather quiet man inclined to have dreams which he tried to crush out of himself in order that he function as a washing machine manufacturer." Though the author considers it "unnecessary to speak of his life up to the time a certain revolution happened within him,"⁴ most of the book is a psycho-confessional monodrama of Webster's life, his thoughts, memories, and desires, in the context of his present dilemma. After years of marriage according to that "insane, wishy-washy philosophy that 'God's in his Heaven, all's right with the world,' 'All men are created free and equal,'"⁵ Webster becomes aware of a sudden acceleration or intensifying within himself of his mental and physical senses. It is the awakening of the repressed, dreamy poetic self that all Anderson's heroes experience. The "little voices"⁶ that sing inside him tell him that he has never loved his family nor liked his job and that he had better abandon them both before it is too late to experience such things as "the desire

⁴Many Marriages, p. 3.

⁵Ibid, pp. 208-209.

⁶Ibid., p. 12.

to create beauty"⁷ and the Vital Force of life. Mesmerized by this revitalizing madness, he places two candlesticks beside a picture of the Virgin and parades in the nude before this altar in his room at night. He keeps this up night after night until the awaited intrusion of his wife and daughter provides the opportunity to tell them of his decision to leave them. In a scene that occupies roughly two thirds of the book, Webster brings to light the entire history of his courtship and marriage, makes rather sinister overtures to his teen-age daughter, and drives his wife to suicide. In the early hours of the morning, he collects the bag he has packed during the bedroom scene, and, with his secretary, Natalie Swartz, walks right out of the old life. He hopes to become a writer who will "only try to tell people what I have seen and heard in life."⁸

Many readers are understandably at a loss as to how to take Many Marriages. Is it to be regarded, they ask, as a serious work of fiction by the same pen that wrote Winesburg, Ohio? The interpretation that probably does least harm to Anderson's stature (which at the time Many Marriages was published was at its highest) is the allegorical one put forward by N. Bryllion Fagin. "The story of John Webster and his awakening to the fact that he has forgotten to live,"

⁷Ibid., p. 108.

⁸Ibid., p. 90.

he says, "is in large measure the story of middle-aged America which has gone on doing things . . . at first for material comfort, then for profit, and, finally, as an automatic mechanical process in itself."⁹ But this interpretation demands too much reading between the lines to be very plausible. Nowhere does Anderson hint at an allegory and the thought of America personified by what Geismar calls this "cornfed Cassanova of narcissistic orgies," this "incestuous manufacturer of washing machines," this "frustrated Rotarian,"¹⁰ is too ridiculous to contemplate.

Régis Michaud sees in John Webster's gospel of sexual emancipation "the last challenge of romanticism at bay." He reminds us that

After Rousseau, Whitman had tried the gospel of sexual sincerity at all cost. . . . Dreiser in The Genius had answered John Webster's questions concerning sexual freedom. Sherwood Anderson himself noted somewhere that humanism and not pantheism, concentration and not expansion could free and feed human hearts. Webster's mystic orgies have not only ethics but common sense against them. But Anderson is a poet. Like Whitman he worships Life and the Vital Force. He wants us to surrender to all beautiful instincts. . . . Life, he proclaims, will empty the prisons. It will raise the lid of the 'well' where the Freudian monsters are asleep, these monsters which the Puritan felt groping within himself, and which he carefully and wisely held in chains.¹¹

⁹Fagin, op. cit., p. 42.

¹⁰Geismar, op. cit., p. 243.

¹¹Michaud, op. cit., p. 195.

No doubt there is an intentionally strong element of sexual mysticism in the book. What one has to decide, however, is where mysticism ends and mystification begins. The initial precept of this and Anderson's other novels--that man must search for the real meaning in life--is the most mystical of themes. But instead of fictionally presenting a convincing case for sex as the ultimate life-principle, Anderson bogs down in a soft, sentimental slush of whining words and pompous ideas. As in the novels we have studied so far, the foundation seems solid enough but it supports no more than hallucinations. Though the reader recognizes the truth of Anderson's intuitions about the sexual factor in life, he also recognizes that Anderson's plunge into the well of the subconscious has taken him far over his imaginative and artistic depth. The result is that the intuitions he dredges up never really surface as truths. If it be true (as Dr. Freud and his followers believe) that the hidden reality of life does lie in sex, then one is forced to conclude that Anderson was unequal to the task of divining it.

In terms of Anderson's career Many Marriages is a pathetic, almost tragic book. When George Willard left Winesburg, one recalls, he was to investigate further the hidden reality of life. If we may infer, as I think we may, that the conclusion of Winesburg, Ohio is a kind of manifesto by Anderson proclaiming his future work, Many Marriages, the second novel published after the short story collection,

abruptly manifests the truth that Anderson's development required far greater literary power than he possessed.

For one thing, he needed the power to blend realism and fantasy. Obviously the characters in Many Marriages do not succeed in being both realistic and fantastic: they are not both individuals in their own right and representations of abstractions. To have made them both individual and representative would have been no small triumph for Anderson. Even Nathaniel Hawthorne's characters are, with a few famous exceptions, typically incredible as real people; but in the representative or symbolic sense they embody and carry so beautifully the freight of Hawthorne's ontological meditations that the reader is kept from questioning their reality. In Many Marriages it seems that Anderson is incapable of making John Webster and the rest credible either as people or ideas.

No matter how much artistic latitude one allows Anderson with regard to character creation, it is impossible to respond sympathetically to his hero. The only thing with which one can sympathize--his determination to live out what he believes to be the truth of life--is nullified by the absurdity of his personality. Then, too, the reader cannot reconcile Webster's determination to live according to a plan with the lesson Anderson learned in Winesburg, Ohio--the lesson that it is impossible to live that way. When Webster parades naked before his altar one is not nearly as conscious of the

cleansing-regeneration ritual as the histrionics of the ego which, were they not so close to sacrilege, would be merely funny. Rebecca West remarks in general of Anderson that "It is an unfortunate fact that the particular fantasy form into which most of Anderson's imaginings flow when they concern sex is one which almost inevitably sets in motion the psychological motion that produces laughter," and, in particular, of John Webster that he never seems "to attain the dignity of complete nudity; his complexes cling to him like dark woollen socks."¹²

Anderson means far more than he is able to say in Many Marriages. His intention in having John Webster take off his clothes and go through a perversion of a religious rite before his bewildered family is not to show the unnatural or pathological state of his hero but to symbolize a psychological and spiritual cleansing of the soul through recognition of "the white wonder" of the body. According to James Schevill, who finds that "the view of the book as 'embarrassing' can only be attributed to a false reading,"

John Webster intends to prove to his daughter how his marriage has become obscene. He has been living the romantic American myths with his wife and has been caught in these illusions. When the wife whose spirit is the "death impulse" in the ceremony kills herself her action represents the sacrifice necessary

¹²Rebecca West, "Sherwood Anderson, Poet," in Strange Necessity (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), p. 282.

to the purification ritual. . . . Only through the purification of the self is an escape possible from the false material standards of middle-class American business morality.¹³

Anderson's intention was to establish a complete and absolute acceptance of the flesh; in other words, to rid sexual relations of the guilt and shame which make love impossible. Love, however, as Anderson never tires of repeating, is not an end in itself but a means of establishing community, "many marriages." It is a means of effecting that universal communion or metempsychosis of the living, as it were, which we noticed in Mid-American Chants. "One could tear down all walls and fences and walk in and out of many people, become many people. One might in oneself become a whole town full of people, a city, a nation,"¹⁴ Webster muses. The nature of his sex mystique is apparent, too, in what Anderson has to say of the "love-making"¹⁵ of Natalie and Webster. Their union, he says, is more than a physical coupling, either for its own sake or for the purpose of reproduction. It is a "sheet of fire"¹⁶ that will clean out the purposelessness, "the perpetual denial of life,"¹⁷ will destroy

¹³Schevill, op. cit., pp. 178-179.

¹⁴Many Marriages, p. 191.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁶Loc. cit.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 113.

ugliness and restore beauty. Anderson insists strongly on freedom of expression of sex instincts, on the unselfish acceptance of the physical aspect of the sexual relation. Not only is it hard to separate love from sex in Anderson but it sometimes seems as though instinctiveness is the same thing as sacredness in the "many marriages" Webster advocates. Webster's own marriage, of course, is symbolic of the "many marriages" in which the flesh is not sacred.

Very clearly the effectiveness of thematic statement is handicapped by the unfortunate symbolic structure. The crippling artistic naivete of Anderson is seen in the reasoning which governs the choice of the Virgin and the nude Webster as the two principle symbols of the book. The Virgin is a sacred symbol, Anderson seems to say: I wish to show that the flesh is sacred, therefore, I shall have a nude man walk nightly before a picture of the Virgin. To assume that anything not ordinarily considered sacred shall become so by a mere spatial relationship with something that is so regarded--that in itself is incredible, but Anderson asks even more of us than that. He asks us to accept emotively a symbol which he, as author, cannot. If Anderson were able to convince us of the meaningfulness of the Virgin to Webster, then we might be able to translate Webster's attitude from it to the flesh.

Possibly because the basic symbolism of the book is invalid, Anderson is also unable to convince us of anything

dependent on the symbolism. Our sympathy with John Webster and his search for "the white wonder of life" would have been somewhere within the realm of the possible if Anderson had been able to convince us emotively of either Mrs. Webster's guilt or the depth of Webster's love for Natalie. As it is, both are given no reality beyond what Webster sees in them. It is as though we see them through Webster's faulty bifocals which can separate images but not show them in dimensional perspective. The result is that two thirds of the novel is a long, repetitious monologue, a lecture in elementary psychoanalysis in which the official terminology is carefully avoided. Anderson's message to America and to his fellow-artists is: Have the courage to give expression to your libidinal impulses; learn to let go. It was a message the truth of which Anderson himself could never quite accept--and perhaps this has something to do with why his symbolism is unacceptable to readers and why he was unequal to the task of divining the hidden reality of life in sex. Perhaps he was himself unable to accept either his own symbolism or the theories of Freud.

Both Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, the novel that followed two years later, are usually read solely in Freudian terms. The whole issue of when and whether Anderson read Freud is amazingly confused. Anderson always insisted he never read Freud. After noticing the increasing preoccupation with abnormal psychology from Winesburg, Ohio onwards,

many critics (for example, Irving Howe,¹⁸ Frederick Hoffman¹⁹) find it impossible to believe this, especially in view of the fact that Anderson was notoriously unreliable when on the subject of himself. They maintain that the ease with which elementary Freudian concepts (such as the libido and the incest theme in Many Marriages) and symbols (such as walls, wells, seeds, stones, fire, sea, swimmers, "deep places," and "rape of the unconscious self"²⁰) can be identified in Anderson constitutes a clear case for Freudian influence.

Anderson's writings dealt, like Freud's, with frustrated and hysterical people leading futile lives. Anderson's characters used dreams and symbols as Freud used them. Freud probed into the deepest inner conscious mind and brought into the open repressed desires, and he made sexual drives the core of human behavior. Anderson too appeared to be preoccupied with sex and its power over mankind.²¹

Thus Hans Poppe. What the critics usually do is to read Anderson's books in the light of Freud, then summarize the psychologist's argument so that Anderson can be seen between every line. Harry Hartwick will serve as a typical example of

¹⁸Howe, op. cit., pp. 179-181.

¹⁹Frederick J. Hoffman, "Anderson--Psychoanalyst by Default," in Freudianism and the Literary Mind (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1945), pp. 230-255.

²⁰Many Marriages, pp. 155, 165.

²¹Poppe, op. cit., p. 91.

this. In his Frontiers of American Fiction, Hartwick writes:

Briefly, Freud's concept holds that every person is like an iceberg, with his largest area submerged beneath the threshold of consciousness. That portion remaining below he calls the "subconscious." (Anderson terms it "the well"). Into this nether compartment each man forces the thoughts and impulses that he is ashamed of, or unable to acknowledge and use. Standing guard at the stairway leading up to the "conscious" from the "subconscious" is an invisible agent known as the "censor," who "turns the damper down" on undesirable thoughts, and prevents them from escaping their prison except during sleep, when they often emerge as dreams to furnish the individual with a kind of vicarious gratification.²²

Of the new type of American author (and once again Anderson can be clearly seen) called into being, John Farrar writes:

He [the author] was often introverted, but he now finds himself conscious of his introversion, calling it by name, using it for his purposes much as he would a pet dog. Instead of using his sensitivity to reflect the character of the world at large, he tends to characterize only himself. Instead of creating new characters, he either willingly capitalizes his ego or betrays it.²³

As final internal proof, these critics make much of Anderson's remark in Dark Laughter that "if there is anything you do not understand in human life, consult the works of Doctor Freud."²⁴ As external proof they remind us that Freud and his theories were almost required reading for writers during the period

²²Hartwick, op. cit., p. 127.

²³John Farrar, "Sex Psychology in Modern Fiction," The Independent, CXVII (1926), 669.

²⁴Sherwood Anderson, Dark Laughter (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1925), p. 230.

Anderson was part of the Chicago renaissance, and that he and his friends consciously assimilated the new stimulus into literature.

Rather tired of having Freudian influences pointed out in everything from Aeschylus on, other critics (such as Schevill) have adopted the negative view on any positive link between Freud and Anderson. Being intelligent and au courant, Anderson admittedly had at least a nodding acquaintance with Freud and his theories, but no more than this can be proved from his work. Literature, they say, was Freudian long before Freud. In fact, Freudian psychology, since it deals with the eternal verities of human nature, is little more than an attempt to define and formulate what men, and particularly artists, have always known to be true. It is not Freud but sex we recognize in Anderson, and since for most of us Freud means sex, Anderson is labelled a Freudian. If Anderson had purposely adopted the Freudian point of view, the argument continues, why is there a complete absence of technical language in his work? The answer to this, of course, is that Anderson's mistrust of intellectualism and his tendency, at this time, towards primitivism made the use of technical language "a bit fancy." Watch him, though, making good metaphorical use of the concepts of psychology while implying the layman's scorn of such a highbrow subject.

There was, taking constantly deeper and deeper roots within him [John Webster], a new viewpoint of life or rather, to be a bit fancy and speak of the matter

more in the modern spirit, as he himself might later have done laughingly, one might say he had been permanently caught up and held by a new rhythm of life.²⁵

There are, in conclusion, three things that need to be said about Anderson's brush with the Viennese doctor. First, Anderson probably got most of what he owes to Freud more or less indirectly through D.H. Lawrence. Anderson first read Lawrence in 1920 and his admiration for the Englishman at times approached the worship of the novice for the master. Second, Anderson is probably much closer to a student of Freud's, Carl Jung, than he is to Freud. Jung, one recalls, disagreed with Freud's attempt to didactically systematize human psychology and turned towards such intangibles as archetypes, myths, and the race consciousness. It seems to this writer that those critics who insist on Anderson's obsession with sex would do better to place him against the Jungian rather than the Freudian background. Third, Anderson, after playing with and not fully understanding Freud, was more confused than ever about life. His use of the Freudian context for his book (whether for a purpose or because it happened to be in the literary air) and his small town mistrust of it; John Webster's suspicion at the last that the "little voices" of his subconscious have not been telling the whole truth; his wife's suspicion that both conventional morality and free emotional expression are wrong ("To listen

²⁵Many Marriages, p. 118.

to the voices brought death. Did closing one's ears to the voices bring death too?"²⁶--all these betray a conflict confusing and crippling to this book and the one that followed.

III

In 1925, two years after the publication of Many Marriages, the best-seller Dark Laughter appeared. Because of a lack of confidence in Huebsch as a salesman and of a good offer from Boni and Liveright, Anderson had changed publishers. Under his new contract he was to get one hundred dollars per week for five years plus fifteen per cent of retail sales and ten per cent of sales of each Modern Library reprint. Anderson's end of the bargain was to write a book a year. The first of these, Dark Laughter, revealed that Anderson had done more than change his publisher. The book is in a new impressionistic style and it contains an idea entirely new to Anderson. To say with James Schevill that its stylistic influences were "James Joyce's Ulysses, the 'European mood', and New Orleans jazz"²⁷ is to detract from the strength of Anderson's thesis that industrialism has rendered modern man impotent. This thesis has been part of our industrial age's climate of ideas, of course, as far back as Whitman. Industrialism, Anderson says, by removing

²⁶Ibid., p. 163.

²⁷Shevill, op. cit., p. 209.

the tactual relationship that existed between the craftsman and his materials, has made modern man impotent--that is, most modern men, for there are still the Negroes and the Sponge Martins who have managed to resist this sterilization.

For John Webster, salvation lay in renunciation of family, repudiation of social responsibility, and dedication to self-realization and the idea of community through sex. The implication is that he and Natalie are to lead a bohemian, unfettered existence something like the one Anderson and his second wife, Tennessee Mitchell, agreed on. Yet Anderson and Tennessee were married, and although what might happen afterwards is anybody's guess, marriage will probably be the conventional result with two people such as Webster and Natalie. The note of indecision on which Many Marriages closes (in their early morning flight, one recalls, John asks Natalie to walk on the grass so they won't make a noise) is not found in Dark Laughter. The implication is that Aline and Bruce (the counterparts of Natalie Swartz and John Webster) have found the Good and the Good is marriage. They are to become Sponge Martins (the image of the craftsman-primitive) and give expression to their direct primitive urges in the simple and beautiful way that is characteristic of the Negroes--but only after the blessing of society and the church has been secured. The moral of Dark Laughter is the moral of Many Marriages--take the lid off the "well." But the two novels differ in that Many Marriages has no object-ideal,

no Sponge Martins, no Negroes. In Many Marriages Anderson says man must be himself; in Dark Laughter that he must be a primitive. Primitivism, then, is the answer to the cause and effect linkage between industrialism and impotence and it is in the parallel reiterations of the industrialism-impotence-primitivism themes that the book has its roots.

Anderson's primitivism, as suggested above, is a modified primitivism--it is primitivism within the social framework of marriage. As in Marching Men we find that Anderson is not prepared to go all the way with a radical idea. If John Webster's renunciation of the family for the sexual independence of bohemianism tended ultimately toward recommitment to a new family, Bruce Dudley renounces both the family and bohemianism and is by his own admission reduced to family recommitment. And whereas Many Marriages ends on a note of hope for fulfillment, Dark Laughter ends on a note of resignation to the inevitable. Rather sullenly, Bruce takes a deep breath and realizes that, "Oh, Lord, I'll have to work now. I'll have to be definite."²⁸ In his hey-day, as it were, about midway through the book, he had been pursuing the "white wonder of life" in a carelessly bohemian way, tossing off pomposities like, "What the world wanted was more lovers and fewer husbands and wives."²⁹ (In a personal sense Anderson

²⁸ Dark Laughter, p. 291.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 235.

is, in Dark Laughter, following the full pattern of his own story for the first time. He had revolted from the family for, he presumed, an independent existence, only to recommit himself through marriage not once but three times).

Notice that Anderson is unable to quite make up his mind whether he means the socially acceptable Sponge Martin or the amoral Negro by primitivism. Presumably Sponge has the best of both worlds--he is a craftsman and a primitive. He lives in a manner characteristic of the Negro (that is, the Negro as conceived by Anderson) but functions normally as a social being. His secret is that instead of becoming civilization's (and, more specifically, industrialism's) slave he has turned the tables on it by taking from it just what he needs. Of Sponge and his wife Anderson says, "The man and woman had stayed within the limits of their powers, had moved freely within a small but clear circle of life."³⁰

The story itself is actually the interwoven climax of three stories--of Bruce Dudley, Aline Grey and Fred Grey. Dudley was a Chicago advertising writer (as Anderson was) married to a literary career wife, a type of the "new woman." Unable longer to tolerate his wife's indifference about marriage, Dudley (or John Stockton, as his identity then was) asserted the masculine principle by deserting his wife to wander down the Mississippi as a reminiscing, day-dreaming

³⁰Ibid., p. 117.

version of a grown-up Huck Finn in leisurely search of the truth about himself. Bruce sensed a creeping impotence in his home and in his office where one is "so impotent you don't even write your own stuff."³¹ He is working when the story opens in the Grey factory beside old Sponge Martin, the "unmoral unchristian"³² old-time craftsman who reminds one of the Joe Wainsworth of Poor White. Fred Grey and Aline had met and married in post-war Paris. Fred, who "had a hero-Theodore Roosevelt,"³³ is the son of a midwestern wheel manufacturer come to fight for the American way of life in the trenches of France, and Aline, the daughter of a small town American banker, is in Paris with a fast crowd to receive a kind of education sometimes lacking amongst the American colleges. They are thrown together ("like drops of water in a river, flowing along")³⁴ because they obviously do not belong at a Scott-Fitzgerald type party in Paris at which the American hostess gives a fairly detailed account of how she went "the limit"³⁵ at a Quat'z Arts Ball the night before because she "felt so vividly the shame of escape when the

³¹Ibid., p. 43. Anderson expands more fully on the subject of impotence in the Notebook, p. 153.

³²Ibid., p. 290.

³³Ibid., p. 190.

³⁴Ibid., p. 174.

³⁵Ibid., p. 199.

world is plunged into mud."³⁶ Fred is terrified by the decadence of Europe and the post-war collapse of the old values. "You go along in life," he thinks, "not thinking very much, not feeling very much, not knowing very much--about yourself or anyone else--thinking life is so and so, and then--bang! Something happens. You aren't at all what you had thought you were. A lot of people found that out during the war."³⁷ He is panicked into proposing to Aline, (who, because she is American, he reasons, must be pure), and while he is seeing white-clad Virgins walking up into the sky from the roof of Notre Dame, she accepts. She accepts because, like the hostess, "Aline wanted to be in something--up to the hilt--the limit--once, anyway."³⁸

They return to America to take over the Grey factory at Old Harbor, Indiana, the town of Bruce Dudley's youth to which he has returned as a stranger. Aline and Fred quickly realize, though, that but for that one night in Paris, they have never been in love, that "a wall separates them."³⁹ There is an inability in Fred to arouse love in Aline and this impotence, physical or symbolic, is the reason there are

³⁶Ibid., pp. 195-196.

³⁷Ibid., p. 139.

³⁸Ibid., p. 203.

³⁹Ibid., p. 205.

no children. Like Dudley's wife, Grey has lost the sense of "the white wonder of life," has become impotent through his submission to the inhuman values and competitive ethics of the industrial age. Fred Grey degenerates physically to the accompaniment of the rich, dark laughter of the Negro servants who know, presumably because they are Negroes, of his wife's indifference. Tom Butterworth (in Poor White) suffers physical degeneration, but Fred Grey's impotence, his inability to hold his wife, is something new. It is as if the element of neurosis Anderson implied as a concomitant of degeneration in Tom Butterworth had proved on closer examination to be an outward symptom of a deeper impotence.

Aline has her eye on Bruce because he reminds her of the young man she was really attracted to at the Paris party. She arranges for Bruce to work for her as a gardener. Sponge, who can still do "a thing worth doing . . . better than most other men,"⁴⁰ knows as well as the Negroes what will happen. Eventually it does happen; Aline is "fulfilled,"⁴¹ and Bruce goes away confused. ("If life were not so complex it would be more simple." "After all, men are men and women are women.")⁴² He finally returns, claims Aline and her unborn

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 117.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 251.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 65-66, 289. It is wonderfully easy to make fun of Dark Laughter, but see the not very brilliant parody, The Torrents of Spring, by Ernest Hemingway.

child, and takes them away before the eyes of Fred who has guessed everything but, characteristically, is unable to do anything.

To any reader of D. H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterley's Lover, Dark Laughter must immediately suggest a connection between the two writers. To such an extent do they share the same ideas and attitudes on sex, primitivism, anti-intellectualism, evangelism, and "dark relationships," that it is possibly something more than coincidence that they should include so many similarities in the relationship of their characters. Since Anderson's book was published three years before Lawrence's he could not have been directly influenced, and, as far as this writer knows, there is no record of Lawrence being under Anderson's influence at this time. Lawrence possibly read Anderson but when he did so is uncertain. Anderson certainly read Lawrence and could not find praise high enough for him. But according to Irving Howe, when Lady Chatterley's Lover appeared in 1928, Anderson, in a mood of rapture and despair, told his friends he had hoped to write such a novel but had been "dispossessed"⁴³ of the subject by Lawrence. Apparently neither he nor anyone else realized he had just written a novel on that very subject. Lord Chatterley and Fred Grey, both in pursuit of the "bitch-goddess, Success," are symbolically sterile; their wives secretly

⁴³Quoted in Howe, op. cit., p. 182.

surrender themselves--one to a gamekeeper, the other to a gardener--to lovers who have a masculine glow; the two women become pregnant; the lovers at first resent their loss of privacy and independence; the illicit affairs are finally disclosed to the husbands; and the wives leave with their lovers to await the birth of their children.

It is interesting, too, that both writers achieve the same tone in their use of natural description. Compare, for instance, these two passages from Many Marriages and Sons and Lovers, respectively:

They had got out upon the hill where they could look back over the valley and she sat with her back against a tree. Spring had passed, but, as they walked through the wood, there had been, on all sides, a sense of new growth springing up. Little green, pale green things were just pushing their way up from among the dead brown leaves and out of the black ground and on trees and bushes there was a sense of new growth too.⁴⁴

They found at the top of the hill a sudden wild field, two sides of which were backed by the wood, the other sides by high loose hedges of hawthorn and elder-bushes. Between these overgrown bushes were gaps that the cattle might have walked through had there been any cattle now. There the turf was smooth as velveteen, padded and holed by the rabbits. The field itself was coarse, and crowded with tall, big cowslips that had never been cut. Clusters of strong flowers rose everywhere above the coarse tussocks of bent. It was like a roadstead crowded with tall, fairy shipping.⁴⁵

Since Anderson was reading Lawrence at the time he wrote

⁴⁴Many Marriages, p. 178.

⁴⁵D. H. Lawrence, Sons and Lovers (Reprint; London: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 290.

Many Marriages this may even be a case of conscious emulation, but the probable explanation of the coincidence of plots noticed above is that when two authors are moving along with such ideological and emotional similarity, the odds on their sooner or later writing novels with similar plot structures are quite high.

Faced with the same problem in society, both writers arrived at the same solution--primitivism. That Anderson settled upon the Negro rather than the Mexican Indian (as Lawrence did) as his primitive ideal, his noble savage in an ignoble world, was due probably to the influence of Gertrude Stein's Melanctha and also to the fact that Anderson did not know the Indian as well as he did the Negro. This arbitrariness of choice is, of course, typical of the modern primitivists. Their chief concern is to escape to a culture other than their own, and once they have done this it seems as though almost any culture will do that is (a) familiar to them, either through experience or reading; (b) able to boast a sometime noble past; and (c) preferably rich in lore capable of being fictionalized. Thus Kipling saw the noble savage in Kim, Burroughs in Tarzan, Lawrence in the Mexican Indian, Anderson and Faulkner in the Negro, Hemingway in the European peasant, and countless others in the American cowboy. All of these writers share to some extent or another in the modern Rousseauistic movement in literature that comes to mind with the name of John Cowper Powys. They are all making,

as Régis Michaud said of Anderson, a "last challenge of romanticism at bay."

Anderson's idea in the plot-line of Dark Laughter, as in Winesburg, Ohio, is to emphasize how things can be "absurdly unimportant and at the same time all-important."⁴⁶ Thus the fact that Aline, having something in common with only two other people at the party in Paris, was approached by the wrong one determined the course of her marriage and her attraction to Bruce. This is the reason why events and people weave back and forth irrespective of time through the consciousness of the characters. This is the "counterpoint of life"⁴⁷ that Joseph Warren Beach speaks of in connection with another book of this period, A Story Teller's Story (1924). On the opening page we read that Sponge and Bruce are working in the factory; on page one hundred and twenty-four the same day, that they are walking out of the factory door. In the intervening pages we have learned all sorts of things about them.

A man like Bruce could think a hundred diverse thoughts walking ten steps beside a workman named Sponge Martin.⁴⁸

.....

He could imagine himself a fellow like that Bloom in the book Ulysses and it was evident that Joyce, the writer and dreamer, was in the same boat.⁴⁹

⁴⁶Dark Laughter, p. 211.

⁴⁷The Outlook for American Prose (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), p. 258.

⁴⁸Dark Laughter, p. 98.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 126.

The novel appears to be more structurally planned than any of Anderson's earlier ones, but although Anderson uses the stream-of-consciousness technique quite well, one has the impression that it is not the characters but the author who is free-associating, that he is setting down, as fragments and ellipses of thought, everything that comes into his mind, letting his fancy go to the extent that he sometimes forgets to assign his free associations to a character's mind and has characters reflecting on facts they could not possibly know. For the Anderson of this period, however, this was the way life was, the way it should be lived. "All the art of life," he had written in Many Marriages, "perhaps consisted in just letting the fancy wash over and color the facts of life."⁵⁰ For many readers this attitude suggests that Anderson is using the stream-of-consciousness technique as a trick of style, or as "an excuse for novelists who are afraid to join life's fragments together," to use Harry Hartwick's figure, "for fear the addition might come out wrong."⁵¹

According to Cleveland Chase, "the story is a thoroughly Proustian psychological monologue." (We have already noted the similarities between the nostalgic methods of Proust in A la Recherche du temps perdu and Anderson in Winesburg, Ohio).

⁵⁰Many Marriages, p. 203.

⁵¹Hartwick, op. cit., p. 139.

Showing fine, though possibly over-enthusiastic, appreciation of Anderson's method, Chase continues:

Bruce, working in an automobile factory, is reminiscing to himself, and through his wandering thoughts we get his life as he has seen it. The tempo of the story is admirably controlled; never does the monologue become intentionally monotonous; soliloquies, psychological analyses, descriptions, lyric moments, anecdotes, are woven into a lively and harmonious pattern. At times apparently confused, the total effect of the story is one of great simplicity and cohesion.⁵²

IV

In these two books, Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, then, Anderson's search goes on. A blundering, untutored sophisticate, Anderson is still looking for the meaning to his own and contemporary American life. Having in his earlier works tried and failed to find a permanent meaning in his origins and memories, he examines the full pattern of his own experience. The "right place and the right people" were not to be found there either; in fact the place he had already rejected in Winesburg and Poor White, and the people were really too silly for him to like.⁵³ There was something he had in common with them, though, that made him shy away, made him refuse once more to accept the findings

⁵²Chase, op. cit., p. 59.

⁵³Cf. Lionel Trilling, "Sherwood Anderson" in The Liberal Imagination (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1953), p. 41. "The more Anderson says about people, the less alive they become-- and the less lovable. Is it strange that, with all Anderson's expressed affection for them, we ourselves can never love the people he writes about?"

of his search and start out afresh. There was something in the heroes of the two books of the mid-twenties that spelled self-realization for Anderson. Both books have a subdued, confessional note missing from the earlier ones and the new mood is indicative of a new awakening by Anderson, this time to the truth that he was an even more improvident son of his improvident father. The spirit of revenge against his father that prompted Sam McPherson to want to "repay all the years . . . by just one long, hard grip at this lean throat,"⁵⁴ has become the spirit of self-accusation. It will, in the autobiographies Tar and A Story Teller's Story, be mollified into amused toleration, for Anderson realizes that Sam is his father, that he himself is his father, Irwin. Thus the passion for explanation that drives Anderson's heroes to find out the truth, however harmful, about themselves. And this is the quality that defines the appeal of his best work--his short stories. One character concludes that "I'm a fool," another "wants to know why," a "man who became a woman" for a night is "just trying to make you understand some things about me."⁵⁵ What Anderson understands about himself is that the personal conflicts of John Webster, who has renounced the only role in life to which he is fitted and become at once a glad and faintly masochistic reprobate of suburbia, are his father's and inescapably his own. It is inescapably that is the operative word here.

⁵⁴WMS, p. 94.

⁵⁵Sherwood Anderson, Horses and Men (Reprint; London: Jonathan Cape, 1927), p. 100.

What Webster does is to identify gladly with others who have gone the way he is going. He has a recurring fantasy in which he sees an old man, a sailor, a Negro prize fighter, a gambler, and an actress, "reprobates all and all walking with the stride of kings." Towards the end of the book, "He knew what he wanted. The woman on the hill was one of the strange people, like the sailor who had come down to the ship, the old man in the road, the actress coming out of the stage door of the theatre, one of the people who had crowned themselves with the crown of life."⁵⁶ These people are the real heroes of Anderson.

Trapped finally by this long-suspected truth concerning his origins, Anderson cannot fight off an increasing element of despair in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter; and he complains with the despairing heroine of "Out of Nowhere into Nothing," a story written around this time, that "there is something essentially dirty about life,"⁵⁷ both in its nature and its justice. Faced with this impasse, Anderson turns to the Negro. Perhaps like the little boy with one broken shoe-string who breaks the other to spite himself, Anderson reasons that if his origins were low, he'd make the best of them and go even lower. One could rationalize the Negro's amorality by his vitality, and submerge one's own failure and impermanence

⁵⁶ Many Marriages, pp. 196, 204.

⁵⁷ The Triumph of the Egg, p. 238.

in his insatiable lust for life. This reasoning, unformulated as it may have been, lay somewhere back of his saying that "for whole days I try being a black man,"⁵⁸ and of his adopting the Negro as a symbol of what he found lacking in contemporary American life.

The white man has lost and cannot find "the white wonder of life," the capacity to live the life of the senses to the full. If Anderson's intention is that Aline Grey and Bruce Dudley are going to find "the white wonder" in marriage, the conclusion of Dark Laughter does nothing to support this. Bruce's reaction to the new marriage ("Oh, Lord, I'll have to work now. I'll have to be definite." is one that caused him to renounce the old. And although the observation was made in the preceding chapter that sex in Anderson always has salvation through communion as its end, the impression one gains in both Dark Laughter and Many Marriages is that communion through sex is the individual's way of escaping not only an isolated self but a self chafed by the normal, human ties of domesticity. Further, the effort in Dark Laughter to invoke the primitive nobility of sex through the noble-savage image of the American Negro conjures up all the wrong associations. Bruce Dudley and John Webster do not find "the white wonder of life," just as Sam McPherson, Beaut McGregor, and Hugh McVey did not find what they were looking for. And Bruce Dudley's attempt to find "the white wonder" in

⁵⁸Notebook, p. 132.

marriage, to find salvation where it did not exist in the first place, is at best a compromise. Marriage, like the town of Winesburg, has changed. The plain fact is that Dudley follows the pattern of the previous Anderson heroes-- in despair he turns once more for hope to something already proved hopeless.

Thus, what was to be a noble and timely plea for sexual sincerity degenerates in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter into silly bohemianism. Anderson's true purpose slipped away from him because of his consuming despair at the continuing frustration of his search and because by this time he had begun to dabble in Freudianism. These two factors were responsible for his mistaken belief that, having touched on the hidden reality of life in Winesburg, Ohio, he could penetrate more deeply by hypothesizing that this reality lay in sex. Actually, in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter he completely lost the considerable depth he had reached in Winesburg, Ohio.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A SINKING BACK INTO LIFE

"In a sense this whole thing /editing the Smyth County News and the Marion Democrat/ is a sinking of myself back into life. It is a great sea, this thing we call life, and I like swimming in the sea. I have been in the desert too long."¹

Anderson had virtually nothing to say after Dark Laughter. Nevertheless he kept on writing, publishing a book a year.

Two reasons for his output are easily discerned. In the first place, after being released, at his own request, from his one hundred dollars a week contract with Boni and Liveright in 1927, Anderson found himself in a precarious financial condition which was to last the rest of his life. In fact, the only financially smooth stretch for him after 1925 resulted from his share of the large sales of Dark Laughter. A second reason for his literary productivity was the inspiration of Eleanor Copenhaver, the refined social worker he met in 1930 and married in 1933. Drawing Anderson's interest to the plight of the Southern mill-workers in the 1930's, placing her trust in his ability, and pointing out his duty to be a creative voice for reform, she was responsible for much of Anderson's literary

¹Letters, p. 179

activity after 1930.

There were, however, deeper reasons why Anderson continued to write. What else was there for him to do but write? Not only did he feel it was too late for him to take up another vocation (he was forty-nine when Dark Laughter was published), but he felt it would be temperamentally and spiritually impossible for him to alter his destiny. He was as deeply committed as ever to the practice of the writer's craft, the only honorable way of life he could conceive; and he was equally committed to his quest for personal and national salvation through his art. So Anderson stuck to his pen, even as he entered a discouraging period of deterioration in his creative powers, his literary reputation, and his personal relationships.

The most serious deterioration was in his creative powers. After Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, his two artistically disastrous attempts at finding "the white wonder of life" in the puzzling company of D. H. Lawrence and Doctor Freud, it should have been clear to him that he could not become a major novelist of ideas, that his depiction of Winesburg, Ohio, was as far as his talent would take him. But Anderson's problem, as we have remarked before, was that he was not and could not be content to stay in Winesburg. Like the poor boys from the country who are the heroes of his early books, Anderson was always drawn to the cities he hated. Through his urban associations he was drawn to the

sophisticated ideas and methods he deplored in contemporary writers. For a time in the late 1920's Anderson attempted to return to his old Winesburg manner in sketches he wrote for two country newspapers. But he left the papers to champion striking mill-workers and to write a novel for their cause. Apart from Death in the Woods (1933) the late twenties and the thirties was a period of frustrations, doubts, and indecision for Anderson. He had reached a basic impasse in his career--he could not bring himself to write in the only manner in which he could write well, the Winesburg manner.

The decline in Anderson's creative powers was possibly accelerated by the decline in his literary reputation. In 1927 he wrote Ralph Church that "my death as a writer is being tolled up and down the literary press."² Always over-sensitive to criticism,³ Anderson resented his dismissal each time a new book appeared as a minor talent who had said his say. Anderson felt his critics lacked the respect due the author of an American classic like Winesburg, Ohio. Yet the greatest hurt of all was that he knew they were right. He admitted that, "For all of my egotism, I

²Ibid., p. 175.

³"I have never thought any of the critics who have dissected me have got me right. Perhaps no man ever thinks another has got him right," he wrote in 1925. (Notebook, p.184).

know I am but a minor figure."⁴

In Anderson's personal life also, things kept going wrong. Though those who knew him say that Anderson was always a genially optimistic person, it would be too much to expect a man of his sensitivity not to see a morbid parallel between his literary decline and the train of personal misfortunes that befell him. His third marriage ended in 1929. Like the others before her, Elizabeth Prall had tried to "improve" Anderson but in so doing had made it uncomfortably clear that she was his superior in education and upbringing. All the women Anderson married had more education, more refinement, and less warmth of emotion, one suspects, than he. It is a common observation that in his selection of wives Anderson sought a mother figure as well as, and possibly as much as, a mate. Irving Howe even suggests an Oedipus complex in his rejection of his father and his steady idolatry of his Madonna-like mother. What probably happened in Anderson's marriages was that either his wife turned out to be a mate rather than a mother or attempted to be both mother and mate. The last was what the adolescent in Anderson wished for, but his masculine ego, finding what had happened, had to force itself free of the relationship. Some months after his separation from Elizabeth, Tennessee Mitchell, his second

⁴Memoirs, p. 3.

wife, was found dead in a Chicago tenement where she had lived alone for years with her grief over having lost the man she still loved. Thus, while negotiating for a divorce from his third wife, he was reminded, in tragic extreme, of the role he had played in the death of his second.

Another shock had come three years earlier when his youngest brother, Earl, the unwanted child in an overfull house mentioned in the autobiographies A Story Teller's Story and Tar, sickened and died in New York. Unrecognized as a painter, unable to make a go of anything, and unable to forget his rejection by the family, Earl succumbed anonymously and alone to death in America's largest city. Though stricken with a sense of personal guilt at first, Anderson was able to quibble with his brother Karl over the division of Earl's funeral expenses. It is more than likely, however, that any callousness apparent in such behavior was not owing to an absence of genuine grief but was a disguise for the much deeper significance that his brother's death had for Anderson. He was speaking for himself as much as Earl when in his Memoirs he wrote that Earl had "a kind of passionate eagerness in him that constantly defeated him," that "his inner nature was too rich."⁵ Possibly he felt the same way about the personalities of Vachel Lindsay, who killed himself in 1931, and of his friend

⁵Ibid., p. 191.

Hart Crane, who drowned himself in 1932.

II

In the late 1920's, then, Anderson was a troubled and anxious man. What was to become of his career as a writer? Where was he to get further subject matter?

He was living at Ripshin Farm, a country house built under his personal supervision in Marion County, Virginia. Financed by the profits of Dark Laughter, the house was a wood and stone structure, solid, dignified, yet simple. Outside was a writing cabin where Anderson turned out a succession of unfinished and unpublished novels. While he was trying hard and unsuccessfully to write, two country newspapers (the Smyth County News and the Marion Democrat) came up for sale. Reflecting wryly that the urge to write would probably come if he had something else to do, he borrowed money to buy the papers and began editing them in 1927.

With the building of Ripshin Farm, Anderson gave himself the opportunity actually to put down roots for the first time in his life. Selecting the Blue Ridge mountain setting himself, planning the home himself, paying for it himself, owning the land himself--all this was a new and profoundly satisfying experience for a man of Anderson's experience, a man who had never owned a house or a square foot of land in his life. It was the experience he had dreamt of in Tar

and elsewhere:

He was an American, had always lived in America, and America was vast, but not a square foot of it had ever belonged to him. His father had never owned a square foot of it. . . . If you want to be something in this world, own land, own goods.⁶

To be something in this world, he sought spiritual roots in Tidewater Virginia's tradition and aristocracy (although Marion was in the south-west corner of the state). "Virginia is a state with a past," he said. "There was a civilization born down here, made down here."⁷ Once this was said, it was easy for him to expect "integrity" and "wholeness"⁸ from the state, to want Jefferson, Lee, Stuart, and Jackson as his "spiritual fathers."⁹ He insisted on making a living off the land at Ripshin Farm, telling his wife, who rather enjoyed being a country lady, that "it is a dishonorable thing to live on land and not work constantly to make it more productive," that "no man could make claim to aristocracy who destroyed the land under his feet."¹⁰

Subtracting the pomposity (so reminiscent of Windy McPherson and Anderson's own father) from this, one is left

⁶Tar, p. 41.

⁷Memoirs, p. 3.

⁸Ibid., p. 397.

⁹Ibid., p. 398.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 439.

with the fact that Anderson had at last settled down. With a new wife, and a new kind of country-squire respectability, Anderson had migrated from bohemia to the simple country town.¹¹ Thus he was living out the solution he had worked out for Bruce Dudley in Dark Laughter. Dudley, one remembers, had renounced the family for bohemianism, then bohemianism for the family again. If our thesis that the successive stages of Anderson's search for salvation are fictionally recounted in his books be correct, it was inevitable that he should build a home after directing Dudley to do the same, and it was fitting that the house should be built with the earnings of Dark Laughter.

The taking over of the two weekly papers was, in the first place, a means of earning a living. The papers also gave him an opportunity to become reacquainted with his two sons whom he asked to go into the venture with him as journalists. But the important reason for his decision was that he could have a mass of literary source material in the form of the weekly news. Ideas for writing would come to him now, instead of having to be laboriously sought out. Above all, it was the kind of material he felt he needed to put him back in touch with the flux of common life,¹² which he knew had been the source of his best stories. As an editor

¹¹"If it were possible I would like to be a quiet retiring gentleman, concealing everything from my fellows," he wrote in 1925 (Notebook, p. 184).

¹²Ibid., p. 175.

he was a center of the little town's life--its aspirations, its tribulations, its provincialism, and its wise and placid acceptance of life. Anderson believed that the reason for his inability to write at this time was that he was separated from life as a consequence of professionalism and fame.¹³ He wanted to escape from professionalism in writing into the "certain amateur spirit"¹⁴ of journalism. The true reason, however, for his separation from life was that he had, in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, tried mistakenly through sex to get closer to the hidden reality of life he had divined in Winesburg, Ohio. Instead of taking him to the real heart of the human condition, the "white wonder of life" had side-tracked him because of the over-emphasis he gave it. In terms of his quest, then, a "sinking back into life" was essential. And the opportunity to write in any style he liked for the newspapers he personally owned and operated was the new start he needed. Since the artistic level of his writing needed to be no higher than he cared to make it and the deadlines he had to meet were

¹³See his Letters, p. 179. His diagnosis of what was wrong with American literature in 1916 proved to be an accurate prognosis of his own case ten years later. In 1916 he had written: "We shall never have an American literature until we . . . become in ourselves more like our fellows, more simple and real. . . . We shall have to begin to write out of the people and not for the people." (Notebook, pp. 196-197).

¹⁴Hello Towns! p. 7.

regular, it was a chance to establish a flow of easy, unlabored prose. Once the flow had strengthened it could be deftly switched into the channels of serious literature.

Judging by Hello Towns (1929), his volume of selected journalism from these years, Anderson adapted easily to the new medium, even if he did so by ignoring its conventional rules. One gets the impression that Anderson was enjoying his writing for the first time in years. Leaving the amusement of writing opposing political editorials for the two papers (one of which was Republican and the other Democratic) to others, Anderson had fun with his cracker barrel pundit "Buck Fever" and his mother "Malaria Fever," infused culture by excerpting Carlyle and Turgenev and soliciting articles from his artistic and literary friends, and let himself go in his editorial column "What Say" on any subject the news might suggest.

Sometime in 1928, however, his readers began to notice that the editorials were taking on a melancholy note. Wistful, then pessimistic pieces appeared on how difficult it was for authors and "common people"¹⁵ to establish rapport, and how difficult it was for authors to survive under democracy which has "nothing to do with the arts, justice, equality, morality."¹⁶ The truth was that Anderson had been thinking these thoughts right from the beginning.

¹⁵Quoted Schevill, op. cit., p. 252.

¹⁶Hello Towns!, p. 326.

In Hello Towns, the structure of which is based on the cycle of a year, Anderson wrote in November, 1927, one week after he began editing:

An editor's thoughts--not published. Terror. These people. Suppose they find me out. Can I do this thing? What do I know of all these lives?

I have been out of a small town too long. How close it is here. I cannot breathe.

.
I do not want to be intimate with people. Why did I come here to a small town?

.
I have eminence of a sort in some places but there is no eminence here. Here I must stand on my own two feet. Will the men here in the shop like me?¹⁷

Quickly these doubts increased until he felt they could no longer stay hidden from his readers. It probably came as no surprise to them when in 1929 he suddenly took a Southern vacation and turned the papers over to his elder son on his return.

The truth was that for Anderson salvation was not in settled and domestic country life. The solution he had hinted at for John Webster, decided upon for Bruce Dudley, and tried for himself was like all the other solutions--none at all. The mountain people of Marion, though "an independent people, full of personality,"¹⁸ were not "the right people." They liked and respected the distinguished newcomer, but could neither understand nor accept him

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 9, 32.

unreservedly into their small, insular society. If their ancestors were those American patricians Anderson wanted as his "spiritual fathers," their way of life was nevertheless that of the industrial twentieth century. And for Anderson, the twentieth century was never "the right place." In both his life and his works, the place he always wanted, searched for, but never found was the place Tar, who is Anderson, imagined his birthplace to be:

It was a little white town in a valley with high hills on either side. You reached it by a stage-coach going up from a railroad town twenty miles away. . . . This town of Tar's birth, this purely fanciful place which has nothing to do with the real Camden, had no electric lights, there was no waterworks, no one there owned an automobile. . . . It was, in short, such a place as might have been found in Judea in Old Testament days. Long, long afterward, oh, how many times afterward, he was to dream over the scene, use it as a background for tales, use it all his life as a background for some great dream he was always having of some day owning his own farm, a place of great barns with unpainted timber beams, grown steely grey with age, of the rich smell of hay and animals, of sun-washed and snow-covered hills and fields and smoke going up out of the chimney of a farmhouse into wintry skies.¹⁹

This was what Anderson was looking for. And he never found it because it belonged to a never-never land. It is Anderson's Golden Age. In a psychological sense it is an image of sublimation. If it be true that Anderson wrote to escape the realities of his age, then he needed this vision of a world of the imagination where he could make anything happen to replace a world with which he could not cope. As Tar,

¹⁹Tar, p. 52.

Anderson admits this: "Very well," Tar thought, filled with bitter resentment, "if I am shut out from one world there is another."²⁰ Anderson's search for salvation is a search for this other imaginative world, this pre-industrial American Garden of Eden which, in the way he paints it, never was. After their break with the village and their disillusionment with the city, Anderson's heroes all go back to the life lived in some version of the town Tar dreams of. And since that town is "purely fanciful," Anderson and his heroes, disillusioned anew, are forced back into their own age to seek solutions which will fail and which will finally decide their author to try just once more some town like Winesburg where he is convinced that "lost, hidden and half-forgotten loveliness" of American life should be. Once more the search for this had failed, this time in the town of Marion, Virginia. In Marion he was attempting once more to sink back not into life, but into his purely fanciful image of the world of the pre-industrial past. "I had a world once," he writes his son in 1929, "and it slipped away from me."²¹

In his Memoirs of this period, Anderson describes a night when, unable to sleep, he wandered away from his country house to "argue with myself."²² Because he needed the money,

²⁰Ibid., p. 61.

²¹Letters, p. 198.

²²Memoirs, p. 444.

he had been attempting that day to write a story in the manner he so detested for a national magazine. It was to avoid having to write according to that "insane, wishy-washy philosophy of life"²³ that he had begun editing the papers, in which he could write how he liked and say what he pleased. But the papers have been sold and Anderson reflects that once more he is party to "the complete selling out of the imaginations of the men and women of America by the . . . story-tellers."²⁴ All at once the stream he is walking across seems to be laughing at him, and, pajama-clad in the middle of the night, Anderson starts to run. He ran

until I was exhausted. I ran up hill and down. I hurt my bare feet . . . and then, hobbling along, . . . I went back over the road along which I had been running . . . and, getting the manuscript on which I had been at work, I took it out to a little open grassy place beside the stream and sitting there on the grass I burned it page by page. . . . I burned the attempt I had made to impose my own will on the people of my imaginative world. I began to laugh at myself.²⁵

Without forcing the allegory too far, one may see in this symbolic incident the significance of Anderson's years in Marion. With the shocking realization that he was yet again attempting, through imposition of will, to change a real town of the twentieth century into his private imaginative world, to force a forgotten past out of an unacceptable

²³Many Marriages, p. 208.

²⁴Memoirs, p. 440.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 444-445.

present, and that he was unable to stop his search returning to this same impossible ideal, Anderson's impulse is to run from the newspapers, from Marion, from himself, from everything--just to run. When he is exhausted from running, he does what he had done before: he rejects the imaginative world he has been hopefully seeking, and resolves not to impose his will any more on the direction his search will take him.

Anderson could not keep on running, though; he had to stop. He had to go on finding out about people, not running away from them. Being away from them, being too self-sufficient in a world of the imagination had led to the miasmas of unreality in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter. His life as a country editor had not solved the problem of those years--he still could not sink back into life, or feel once more the things at the heart of life, the things he had felt in Winesburg, Ohio.

II

One of the things at the heart of American life in the 1930's was the conflict between labor and management. As I have suggested, Anderson had been made more than normally aware of this conflict through his trips to the Southern areas of unrest with Eleanor Copenhaver. Explaining to him, cajoling him, letting him see for himself, and falling in love with him (though he was fifty-four at the time), Eleanor brought Anderson to the realization that here was a challenge

which he, as the chronicler of little and obscure lives, could not in conscience evade. Independently he came to another realization, that by making a cause célèbre of the Southern mill-workers' resistance to the crushing forces of industrialism, he would be monitoring one of the real pulses of life in the twentieth century. By becoming part of the solidarity of the strikers he could also escape his brooding self. He could cast off the introversion that had been clogging the free flow of his creative responses, and replace it by an active interest in crucial issues whose implications involved millions. "Man cannot think clearly of himself, cannot see himself except through others," he wrote. "The self you seek, the true self you want to face, to accept, perhaps to love, is hidden away!"²⁶ He realized that the slow, insular, and unimportant life of Marion had had no active ingredient, as it were, sufficiently strong to stir him out of the old self, to sustain his search along a new path after his affirmation of life, in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, by love, passion, and freedom had, to use Lionel Trilling's words, left life "gray, empty, and devoid of meaning."²⁷ Instead of observing and quietly sifting the daily evidence of life's commonplaceness in his editorial chair, here was a chance for him to be transported, as a

²⁶Memoirs, p. 6.

²⁷Trilling, op. cit., p. 38.

force to be reckoned with, into an enterprise of great pith and moment. If his problem was to sink back into life, his plunge into socialism must surely go a long way towards solving it.

Anderson was peculiarly suited to the enterprise. His background was the same as the workers'. He had come from a working class family--his father had been a factory worker, and he himself had worked in and owned factories. Again, the industrial strife was in the small country towns of the South, which was the region he liked to think of as his "poor white" heritage, and his spiritual home since the 1920's. Thus, when he appeared to speak before the workers he had none of the vaguely humiliating condescension and misplaced idealism of most of the intellectual radicals of the 1930's who shared the platform with him. By a gesture or a back country inflection of speech, he could reach the workers, make them sense that he was with them and one of them. They knew his help would be free of self-interest and that his honesty would let them know if there were no help. Besides the suitability of his origins and regional predilection, Anderson probably felt as strongly as any American of the 1930's about industrialism and what he described as "the struggle of all men against the control of all life by the machine."²⁸

²⁸Memoirs, p. 411.

Joining the struggle in 1929, Anderson spoke and wrote in its behalf for the next seven years. It is not difficult to imagine what he said in his speeches. While admitting that the workers' most pressing need was better wages, Anderson got them to see that they could do more than assert themselves in this struggle, to see that in it they could achieve self-realization. The new life, the spirit of fraternity that seemed to exist everywhere now that they were united in group action was putting them back into touch, as Anderson was trying to get in touch, with the sources of the life of feeling, forgotten during their long period of total bondage to the inhuman machine. During a strike, why, they were "people in love with each other,"²⁹ said Anderson. His utterances now on the subject of the brotherhood of men are vastly different from the fascist indignation of Marching Men in 1917. Besides speaking to groups of workers, his crusading included endorsing socialist manifestos (circulated by friends like Edmund Wilson); leaping to the defense of Theodore Dreiser, indicted for interfering in a Kentucky coal miners' strike; attending the Communist organized "Amsterdam Peace Congress"; writing an "open letter" to President Hoover; and contributing regularly to leftist publications such as the New Masses.

Though much of the journalism of these years remains

²⁹Loc. cit.

uncollected, three independent volumes (Perhaps Women, Puzzled America and Beyond Desire) were inspired mainly by Anderson's part in the socialist movement of the 1930's. As a solution to the social problems raised by industrialism, Perhaps Women (1931) is a failure, but as a lyrical and impressionistic insight into the depth of industrialism's effect on the collective American psyche, it is a volume that commands the attention of every serious student of modern civilization. Perhaps Women is another answer to the question raised by Dark Laughter--what is to be done about the emasculation of men by the machine? In Dark Laughter Anderson had suggested, as Faulkner has since done, a rededication to the simplest kind of family living and a retreat from the industrialized cities. Having himself tried and failed in Marion with this solution, Anderson now speculates that perhaps women, who are closer to nature and unconquered by the machine, can regain dignity and individuality for mankind, can take over the role of husbands, who are no longer lovers, as the creative force in all human endeavor. Apart from the biological question this raises, there is a weakness in the book's logic, which, as Percy Boynton describes it, works like a Lewis Carroll syllogism:

All males work with machines; all machine workers are nothing but machine tenders; all machine tenders are devitalized by the monotony and speed of their work; all women react alike to males.³⁰

³⁰Boynton, op. cit., p. 128.

Yet although Boynton is to the point in saying of Perhaps Women that "generalizations without facts and balance and control are silly when they are made with lyric enthusiasm and a disregard for statistics,"³¹ it is precisely the lyric enthusiasm which finally tips the book in Anderson's favor. In a chapter like "Loom Dance," for example, Anderson captures perfectly the frenetic rhythm, the debilitating speed of the machines and the workers who must keep pace with them.

The journalism of these years continues on into Puzzled America (1935). This essay was the result of a two-month sweep through the South which Anderson did at his own request for the magazine, Today. He wanted to see and report on how such New Deal projects as the Tennessee Valley Authority were rehabilitating the South and on how the erosion of red land made to produce too much cotton for the old Southern landlords was being coped with by the small farmers. The essay has the drawbacks characteristic of Anderson's journalism--false folkiness and rambling form. Despite the usual handicaps, however, Anderson manages to say something quite important. As a series of quick, penetrating impressions of the common man's lot during the depression years, Puzzled America is a vivid image of what the term "depression" really means. By letting the depressed speak for themselves within his skillfully edited argument,

³¹Loc. cit.

Anderson has produced an enduring and vital "inside story."

Even before Puzzled America was published, however, Anderson had begun to feel that the period of active social engagement had renewed his creative impulse by renewing the hold on life he had lost somewhere in the doldrums of the 1920's, and that the novel (Beyond Desire) he had been redrafting for years would now flow smoothly into a final form. Beyond Desire was published in 1932. It is the story of Red Oliver's search for something beyond sexual desire. Oliver believes, his author says, that if he can conquer and transcend desire he will be able to go on and find the ultimate life-principle. The implication is that fulfillment and salvation can thus be achieved. What he finds is a martyr's death in the struggle between labor and management. Once again the central character of an Anderson book can be taken as a persona of his creator, a personification of a stage of the Anderson quest. After his preoccupation with desire in Many Marriages and Dark Laughter, Anderson too had sought something beyond desire, had sought a way of probing deeper into the hidden reality of life, the full discovery of which was a leading motive in his search for salvation. As we have seen, he had recently tried one other way--editing country newspapers; and now he was trying another--championing striking mill-workers. Beyond Desire, then, may be seen as the record of the second part of this post-Freudian and last stage of Anderson's quest.

Briefly, the plot of Beyond Desire is as follows. Red Oliver gets the idea of a search for something beyond desire from a country schoolteacher, the mistress of his best friend. The schoolteacher

had become a sincere Red. She thought there was something beyond desire, but that you had to satisfy desire and understand and appreciate the wonders of desire first. You had to see whether or not it could conquer you, make you forget everything else.³²

Accordingly, Red Oliver submits to desire by contracting an affair with a thirty-and-still-unmarried librarian. However, their eventual union in the library in a typical Anderson scene--symbolic rain is falling outside and the act that is a plea for the life of the emotions occurs in a place where the intellect dominates--proves meaningless to both. Desire has not been satisfied, understood, appreciated or conquered, but Red decides to see whether the Communist cause might provide a chance for him to find something beyond it. Defying threats of the militia summoned by the management of a strike-bound mill, Red steps out from a group of striking workers and Communist agitators and is shot to death.

Red Oliver never finds anything beyond desire. In fact he is one of those people who never really find anything. Anderson has made Red Oliver an exaggerated version of the young Hugh McVey, who was himself exaggerated enough. Red

³²Sherwood Anderson, Beyond Desire (New York: Liveright, Inc., 1932), p. 9.

is young, inarticulate, ignorant, and apparently incapable of learning. One quotation will serve to illustrate the quality of Oliver's mind:

Red Oliver had to think. He thought he had to think. He wanted to think--he thought he wanted to think. In youth there is a kind of hunger.³³

The plain fact is that Oliver cannot think; his mind is still at an elemental level where he sees all hunger as a sexual image. He really does not know what he expects from his affair with the librarian, he cannot say why he has drifted into the North Carolina strike town, and when he dies he has no idea of playing a martyr's role. Here is his and his executioner's state of mind just prior to the shooting:

Red Oliver had stepped out from among the strikers. "Well, hell," he thought. "What the hell," he thought.
 "I'm a silly ass," he thought.
 Ned Sawyer /The officer/ also thought.
 "What the hell," he thought.
 "I'm a silly ass," he thought.
 "Why'd I want to get myself into such a hole?
 I've made an ass of myself.
 "No brains. No brains."³⁴

So he dies--not knowing why, not free of desire, and not understanding either himself or his world.

Recent critics have refuted those earlier ones who, according to the shade of their political convictions, saw

³³Ibid., p. 290.

³⁴Ibid., p. 356.

in the novel when it was published an apology for Communism, Marxism, or social radicalism. Since the reader can have very little faith either in the form of the novel, which is chaotic, or the actions of its hero, who is little more than a high-grade moron, it is difficult to see Beyond Desire as an apology for anything. The truth is as Jarvis A. Thurston has seen it:

If it Beyond Desire has any message, it is that of agnosticism--political, economic, moral-- a message that is conversant with the whole of Anderson's life and works: if there is one single thing that characterizes him it is that he was unable to believe in anything ultimately, although he passionately desired to. Beyond Desire is one more quest, in the direction of Communism, but it ends like all his others, in agnosticism.³⁵

Beneath the artistic problem, central to all of Anderson's novels, of the inadequacy of statement to theme in Beyond Desire, of the gap there is between emotion and articulation, one sees a deeper significance in the novel's pervasive confusion and bewilderment before life. It is actually Anderson who is confused and bewildered. It is confusion and bewilderment, not awe before the ambiguity of experience or feeling too deep for articulation, that lies behind such a passage as the following:

". . . it isn't my struggle . . . it isn't my funeral.
". . . it is . . . it's the struggle of all men . . .
it has come . . . it is inevitable."
". . . it is . . .
". . . it isn't . . . "36

³⁵Thurston, op. cit., p. 239.

³⁶Beyond Desire, pp. 354-355.

Just as his doubts about the newspaper venture began at its inception and finally overwhelmed him, so his uncertainty about socialism had begun when he joined the movement. As early as 1931, he had excused himself from a trip to a strike area with Eleanor:

I do feel myself dear in a transition state . . .
There is something about the whole labor thing
about which I am too uncertain. It is too easy
to encourage men to strike. . . .³⁷

His uncertainty was due, however, not so much to conscience as to ignorance. Anderson was not a card-carrying member of any political party; he had no political theories, no knowledge of the political issues involved in the labor-management struggle, and no familiarity with Communist doctrine. Unable to see beyond the glaring injustices the workers were suffering, Anderson was ready to give his allegiance to any person or party that bandied a slogan with which he emotionally agreed. The facts, had he bothered to look into them, would have shown him that the workers were merely being used as fodder for the cannon the Communists were bringing to bear on the administration. But facts, as Anderson sadly confessed, eluded him.³⁸ When finally the facts were forced on him, he immediately quit the movement, his ego sore, his sense of the futility of human relationships increased. As an artist, he could not

³⁷Quoted Schevill, op. cit., p. 278.

³⁸Memoirs, p. 7.

be expected to waste his time with the manipulations of politics; and as an innocent with the best of motives he had been shamefully led astray.

Actually, though, Anderson's own nature had led him astray. Anderson is one of the supreme individualists of American literature; and socialism, in essence, is a suppression of individuality. It was individualism that led him to socialism with its promises of freeing the individual from the tyrant capitalism. When he realized that tyranny was to be replaced by totalitarianism, it was his individualism again that led him away from socialism. Looking back over Anderson's books, this pattern is precisely what one might expect. The problem of leadership through the individual or the group, the one or the many, is brought out in his first two novels where Sam McPherson represents individual, and Beaut McGregor group fulfillment. The stories of Winesburg, Ohio are all concerned with the problem of individuals outside of society. Poor White, we saw, was the attempt of an individualist to belong to society and to another individual. Many Marriages asks whether through free love the individualist can be one with society. Dark Laughter's answer is no. In each case Anderson's characters are unhappy because they are unable finally to resolve the conflict between the individual and the group. The conflict between the need to belong and the need to hold inviolable one's individuality was also central to Anderson, and was

ultimately the reason why he could not be a member of the people, as socialism demanded, and an individualist at the same time.

This same spiritual conflict is and always has been universal. Furthermore, it will never be resolved. In continually stating the problem, though, Anderson was illuminating the heart of the human condition.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION: ANDERSON'S LITERARY ACHIEVEMENT

"I had a world, and it slipped away from me."¹

In this study it has been my dominant intention to reveal Sherwood Anderson's quest for a salvation he never achieved. I have emphasized his constant--and confused--need for redeeming self-renewal, both in his personal and his literary life. Not only did he frequently change his wife and his place of residence, he abandoned the literary style, that of Winesburg, Ohio, in which he excelled for less successful ones, and he continually altered his ideological directions. His literary discontent was not the result of a true artist's reluctance ever to be satisfied with his work (Anderson was too easily satisfied with much of his), but the product of his incapacity to follow any commitment to its fulfillment. Consequently, it was impossible for Anderson to attain a final state of inner rest, of spiritual repose implicit in the idea of salvation.

Why did Anderson desert each commitment he made? The answer seems to be that he was guided by a basic, though not easily defined, determinism. Each of his paths to salvation returns to its commencement. He could make no general progress

¹Anderson, Letters, p. 198.

toward salvation; he could only make a series of starts. We see how this is true in the early books. Is the suggestion in Windy McPherson's Son that salvation lies in caring for children rejected because it is too narrow? Is the scheme of salvation in Marching Men rejected because it is politically dangerous? No, Anderson does not have Sam McPherson and Beaut McGregor come to such explicit realizations. When their new-found idealisms fall from their eyes, they merely discover that they have never really left home and indeed cannot leave. Or consider Many Marriages and Dark Laughter. Dissatisfied with marriage, John Webster and Bruce Dudley break away from it only to drift quietly back. The case of Dudley is especially to be noticed. There is no real reason to suppose that his second marriage will be any better than his first; indeed, since it grew out of adultery, it could well be worse. Dudley accepts the fact that it is his lot to live in a society in which marriage is an indispensable function of life. He reflects Anderson's own attitude, for Anderson always returned to the marital state, accepting the reality that marriage is necessary to fulfill the biological destiny of civilized man.

At the core of Anderson's feelings lay the tortured conviction that all human relations are ultimately futile. When he writes directly out of his conviction, he seems guilty of indulgent self-pity; but when he transfuses his fiction with it, as he does in Winesburg, Ohio, he divines

its pathos and essential truth. The "grotesques" in the little community of Winesburg cannot escape their condition, either physically or emotionally. This is their tragedy.

Anderson himself was a "grotesque." And because he felt in his deepest being that the conditions that made him one would persist, his search for salvation was destined to be always blocked. Had Anderson been a "purer" and more cosmopolitan artist, he might have achieved, like Henry James, if not a real salvation, an imaginative one. However, his sense of integrity, populist and American like that of Mark Twain and Theodore Dreiser, demanded that salvation be true, not an illusion of art. Haunted by a bleak spirit of determinism, Anderson allowed the successive worlds he envisioned to slip away from him. The fruit of search for salvation was the ultimate realization, implied if not admitted, that the "right place and the right people" could not be found because they never were.

But in spite of the limitations of his vision, and paradoxically because of them, Anderson made a valuable literary achievement; and this achievement, though not an even balance against his failures, has to be carefully weighed in a considered estimation of his literary worth.

Perhaps Lucy Hazard's view of Anderson may be taken as a profitable starting point. Miss Hazard sees that "the significant contribution of Sherwood Anderson is not

his dissent from the accepted values of industrialism," nor is it in his exposing of "the impotence of the old idols of the Gilded Age--scores of writers have anticipated him in that."² Anderson is significant because "he sounds the challenge of a new ideal."³

He sees an America in the making, an America whose passion for size and speed is an unconscious confession of impotence, an America already half-sick of sterile standardization, almost ready for "the rediscovery of man by man." On the frontier of the spirit he discovers a wilderness to be reclaimed, power and beauty to be created out of barren wastes. Americans may have exploited a continent; they have not begun to utilize the potential riches of human relationships.⁴

"An America in the making" is the key phrase here.

Anderson's work stands as a record of America's attempt to reach cultural and spiritual maturity, to come of age. For what is maturity if not the capacity to make an enlightened evaluation of experience in retrospect? Anderson's heroes all find that the goddess of material success has clay feet. They determine to go seek the truth of the spirit. They are symbolic of a profoundly disturbed age--disturbed by the failure of the American Dream to knit up every ravelled sleeve of care. Anderson and his heroes belong to the generation of the First World War and the

²Lucy L. Hazard, "The Coming Age of Spiritual Pioneering," in The Frontier in American Literature (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1927), p. 296.

³Ibid., p. 297.

⁴Loc. cit.

Crash of 1929, the generation of Americans who realized their material independence, the fruits of the American Dream, committed them to rather than absolved them from destiny.

At the same time Anderson's works represent an American culture struggling toward maturity, they also stand as a record of America's immaturity. In 1915, Anderson's friend Van Wyck Brooks wrote an essay entitled "America's Coming of Age," the thesis of which is that the immaturity of American culture lies in its consistent failure to reconcile its two main impulses: intellectuality and pragmatism, or "the abstract and the concrete."⁵ Selecting Jonathan Edwards and Benjamin Franklin as examples of "the infinite inflexibility of the upper levels of the American mind," and of "the infinite flexibility of its lower levels,"⁶ Brooks wrote:

From the beginning we find two main currents in the American mind running side by side but rarely mingling--a current of overtones and a current of undertones--and both equally unsocial: on the one hand the Transcendental current, originating in the piety of the Puritans, becoming a philosophy in Jonathan Edwards, passing through Emerson, producing the fastidious refinement and aloofness of the chief American writers, and resulting in the final unreality of most contemporary American culture;

⁵Van Wyck Brooks, "America's Coming of Age," Three Essays on America (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1934), p. 56.

⁶Ibid., p. 20.

and on the other hand the current of catchpenny opportunism, originating in the practical shifts of Puritan life, becoming a philosophy in Franklin, passing through the American humorists, and resulting in the atmosphere of our contemporary business life.⁷

The immaturity of the culture of Anderson's time is that it had progressed no further than the Transcendentalists of whom Brooks writes: "[They] had no sense of the relationship that exists between theory and practice, between the abstract and the concrete."⁸ To claim cultural maturity for their age, American writers had first to recognize the two main currents of Transcendentalism and catchpenny opportunism and then perform the more difficult feat of reconciling them.

Anderson does not achieve this reconciliation. But he is cognizant of "the relationship that exists between theory and practice, between the abstract and the concrete." And in his intuition, at the root of all his books, that the reconciliation is to be arrived at by studying the inner state of the American mind, he represented a new way of attacking the problem. For, excluding the psychological novels of Hawthorne, Melville and James, there had been an almost total neglect in American literature of the inner life. At the time he began to write Anderson felt this neglect was being accentuated rather than repaired by the

⁷Ibid., p. 19.

⁸Ibid., p. 56.

new literary vogue of realism and naturalism. This movement had found its original inspiration in Zola, its champion in Howells, and its subsequent disciples in Frederic, Kirkland, Garland, Crane, Norris, and Dreiser.

With the exception of Dreiser, Anderson felt that the realists and naturalists, using verisimilitude as their fictional criterion, were oversimplifying experience, tabulating it as a set of conditioned responses to external stimuli, falsifying it as something to be explained by inexorable laws of science and rationalistic determinism. Their method, he felt, was superficial, impersonal, and ignorant of the psychological and spiritual basis of experience. It failed to reach down to the real roots of character. It attempted to measure experience not by subjective impressions on the mind of the individual, but by the objective, indiscriminate truths of inductive science.

Part of the main stream of realism-naturalism was a "revolt-from-the-Village" movement (as Carl Van Doren calls it), composed of writers like Edgar Watson Howe (The Story of a Country Town, 1883), Edgar Lee Masters (The Spoon River Anthology, 1914), and culminating in the novels of Sinclair Lewis. Though Anderson is usually grouped with these writers by the literary historians, he has really very little spiritual kinship with them. It is not simply that his was a retreat to as well as a revolt from the village. The point is that Anderson refused to allow the truth of facts to

exert any superiority over the truth of the imagination. Anderson recognized that the issue at stake was not simply the rival claims of catchpenny opportunism and Transcendentalism, but, in fact, the very nature of truth. He disdained the easy sneer of Lewis' satire in favor of a much deeper, sympathetic involvement in American life. Anderson saw that Lewis' "sharp, journalistic nose for news of the outer surface of our lives" sensed "but little joy in life," and that "in the life of every man and woman in the country there are forces at work that seem to have escaped the notice of Mr. Lewis."⁹ Of the kind of writing critics were giving approval at the outset of his career, Anderson wrote:

The doctor's office, the city street, the vacant lot beside the factory, are described with an amazing finality and fulsomeness of detail. Into these places people are cast, wearing the ordinary clothes such as one is accustomed to see wrapped about the bodies of his friends and neighbors. Having tricked your reader by these purely mechanical details into having faith in the people you are writing about, you simply make these people do and say things no human being has ever been known to do or say.¹⁰

Though Anderson's characters may be as unreal as those of the naturalists, it is not because he refuses to depict character from the inside. The reason is that he was not the novelist to effect the cure he correctly prescribed for the American fiction of his day. Anderson knew this. His

⁹Notebook, p. 53.

¹⁰Quoted Hansen, op. cit., p. 115.

essay "An Apology for Crudity" says in effect that his age was incapable of producing and unprepared for the writer who would reconcile the abstract and the concrete. Crudity (or immaturity, as I have defined it) is in fact "an inevitable quality in the production of a really significant present-day American literature. How indeed is one to escape the obvious fact that there is as yet no native subtlety of thought or living among us? And if we are a crude and childlike people how can our literature hope to escape the influence of that fact?"¹¹

The enduring achievement of Anderson is that despite these constrictions of the American cultural milieu in which he lived, despite the immaturity of a milieu that militated against the kind of introspective inquiry one finds in older cultures, Anderson stands as one of the earliest and profoundest interpreters of the American small town. He is responsible for the two images we have of the American village.

To him, rather than to Howe, Masters, Lewis, or Gale, is due the credit first for the sentimental, popular image of the turn-of-the-century village. The image is made up of the main street, center of the town's business life, of the railroad station with its morning and evening trains, the only links with the outside world, and of the residential part of town where people gossip across the fences. Of

¹¹Notebook, p. 195.

significance is the last house on the street where the town ends and the country begins. Many of Anderson's characters live in houses of this kind. A dust road leads into the fields, to the meadow, to a nearby stream into the woods. There is a hilltop from which one can look over the country. There is a haunted house, a dilapidated mansion that dreams of bygone days. An old orchard, a graveyard, and fairgrounds on the outskirts complete the picture. Emotionally, the village symbolizes a kind of sacred repository of the precepts of old-time Christianity and Jeffersonian Democracy. It is a buttress against the disintegration of these precepts which our age is witnessing. It is the embodiment of the phrase "American way of life." It is a reassurance, enveloped in a shroud of nostalgia which the light of reason is forbidden to pierce, that at some time in the past men resembled more closely that Image in which they were created. Anderson made the small town into a legitimate protagonist of literature, a protagonist that could mold the speech and behavior of characters (as it molded his own) and provide a usable heritage for a good deal of American fiction down to the present day.

More to Anderson's credit, though, is his other image of the American village of the late nineteenth-century. In this the small town is seen as the nexus of the forces of abstraction and materialism, of the two principle currents of Transcendentalism and catchpenny opportunism. Anderson

sees that the reason the worthwhile people of Winesburg are "grotesques" is that the spiritual values have been rejected in favor of concrete ones. "All of them," says Paul Rosenfeld, "are in battle with reality."¹² In Hugh McVey the irresolvable conflict of Bidwell is personified--how is the old communal goodwill of America to survive beside the spectacular but parasitic growth of industrial prosperity?¹³ Hugh's solution is no more than an evasion, of course; at best it is an attempt to escape imaginatively from time into an imperfectly realized world--elemental, timeless, virtuous, forever young and fair. But the recognition of the psychic conflict is there; the statement of the inner problem is there. All this is another way of saying that Hugh and the others are American society, that Anderson's village is America.

¹²Paul Rosenfeld, "Introduction," The Sherwood Anderson Reader (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Company, 1947), p. xiv.

¹³The duality of Hugh is the duality of Anderson. It is the conflict within himself of the truth of reality and the truth of the imagination which he called the conflict of "the slick fellow" with "the Artist," and which Jarvis A. Thurston calls the difference between his "thinking big" and "thinking little" novels (op.cit., p. 81). Anderson's duality, as one might expect, is identical with Brooks' two opposed currents of American culture.

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Anderson's Search for Salvation

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Date of Examination:

November 19, 1958